



**BETWEEN THE HOMELAND AND THE HOSTLAND: (RE)CLAIMING THE  
ARMENIAN REFUGEES IN FRENCH MANDATORY SYRIA, 1918-1946**

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## Abstract/Résumé

**Title:** Between the Homeland and the Hostland: (Re)Claiming the Armenian Refugees in French Mandatory Syria, 1918-1946

**Keywords:** Refugees; Syria; Lebanon; French mandate; The League of Nations; Soviet Armenia; USSR; imperialism; Armenian refugees; Armenian Genocide; Middle East history; transnational history; borders and borderlands; agency and voice; refugee agency

**Abstract:** Today the name “Syria” is associated with large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. The contemporary flight of Syrian refugees comes a century after the region witnessed massive upheaval in the aftermath of the First World War (WWI). Back then, “Syria” was a refugee-hosting country instead of a refugee-generating one and became home to thousands of Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds. Crucially, the arrival and settlement of these refugees happened at a critical historical juncture marked by post-War uncertainties, the formation of the Syrian state under the French mandate, and frustrated attempts to create an independent Arab state. Inevitably, the incoming refugees played an important role – either directly or indirectly, in the state formation processes that shaped modern-day Syria. Although three groups of refugees – Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds, were resettled in Syria during the mandate this dissertation focuses only on the Armenians, the largest refugee community.

Most scholars and observers who studied Syria during the interwar years agree that the refugee issue intensified during certain political events, such as the elections, the granting of citizenship, the Syrian Revolt (1925–1927), the economic crisis, and the new refugee flows at the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s. This was certainly the case. Nevertheless, until now, the refugee issue has mainly been studied based on the Syrian nationalist press, French mandate records, or League of Nations (LoN) archives with some notable exceptions, thus only applying a statist approach. Less attention has been paid to the refugees as historical actors. Where can we locate their agency? What was their attitude to these important events? Were the Syrians unanimously against their settlement? Finally, were the Syrian nationalists and the French mandatory authorities the only relevant actors in the lives of these refugees?

In exploring these questions, this dissertation focuses on these key events using a new corpus of literature and offering new interpretations. This dissertation departs from scholarly approaches to Armenian refugees in interwar Syria that focus mainly on their dichotomous relations with the French mandatory power or the Syrian nationalists. Instead, it aims to locate

the agency of the Armenian refugees while showing how these refugees negotiated their place and status in Syria in relation to all the relevant actors. In addition to the French and Syrian counterparts, the latter included Soviet Armenia, the USSR, Kemalist Turkey, and the Armenian diasporic networks.

**Titre en français :** Entre patrie et terre d'accueil: Aspirations et ambitions autour des réfugiés arméniens en Syrie mandataire (1918-1946)

**Mots clefs :** réfugiés ; Syrie ; Liban ; mandat français ; Ligue des Nations ; Arménie soviétique; URSS; impérialisme; réfugiés arméniens; génocide arménien; histoire du Moyen-Orient; histoire transnationale; frontières et régions frontalières; capacité d'action pour les réfugiés

**Résumé :** Le nom de « Syrie » est aujourd'hui associé à un grand nombre de réfugiés et aux personnes déplacées à l'intérieur du pays. Le sort actuel des réfugiés syriens survient un siècle après que la région fut le théâtre d'un bouleversement majeur dans le sillage des événements de la Première Guerre mondiale. A cette époque, la « Syrie » était un pays d'accueil pour les réfugiés et devint le nouveau foyer de milliers d'Arméniens, d'Assyriens et de Kurdes. Surtout, l'arrivée et l'installation de ces réfugiés se produisit à l'aune d'un tournant historique marqué par les incertitudes de l'après-guerre, la formation de l'État syrien sous le mandat français, et les tentatives infructueuses de créer un État arabe indépendant. Ces réfugiés jouèrent sans surprise un rôle de premier plan – directement ou indirectement – dans le processus de formation de l'État qui définit les contours de la Syrie contemporaine. Bien que trois groupes de réfugiés – Arméniens, Assyriens et Kurdes – fussent installés en Syrie pendant le mandat cette thèse de doctorat se concentre uniquement sur les Arméniens, soit la plus importante communauté de réfugiés.

La plupart des spécialistes et des observateurs qui ont étudié la Syrie pendant l'entre-deux-guerres s'accordent à penser que la question des réfugiés s'est posée de manière accrue à l'occasion de certains événements politiques, comme la tenue d'élections, l'octroi de la nationalité, la révolte syrienne (1925-1927), les crises économiques, et le flux de nouveaux réfugiés à la fin des années 1920 et au début des années 1930. Ce fut certainement le cas. Néanmoins, et en dépit de quelques exceptions, la question des réfugiés a été avant tout étudiée sur la base de la presse nationaliste syrienne, des archives du mandat français ou de la Ligue des Nations jusqu'à présent, adoptant ainsi une approche institutionnelle. Les réflexions menées sur les réfugiés eux-mêmes en tant qu'acteurs historiques sont restées maigres. Où situer leur

marge de manœuvre ? Quel a été leur attitude à l'égard des événements d'ampleur ? Les Syriens se sont-ils unanimement prononcés contre leur installation ? En outre, les nationalistes syriens et les autorités mandataires françaises ont-ils les seuls acteurs pertinents dans la vie de ces réfugiés ?

A travers l'examen de ces questions, cette thèse de doctorat fait le point sur ces faits marquants en utilisant un nouveau corpus de littérature et en développant de nouvelles interprétations. Elle s'appuie sur les approches savantes concernant les réfugiés arméniens pendant l'entre-deux-guerres en Syrie qui se concentrent sur leurs relations dichotomiques avec le pouvoir mandataire français ou les nationalistes syriens. Cette thèse de doctorat vise ensuite à évaluer la marge de manœuvre des réfugiés arméniens tout en montrant comment ces réfugiés ont négocié leur place et leur statut en Syrie en relation avec tous les acteurs concernés. Ces derniers, outre les interlocuteurs français et syriens, ont compris l'Arménie soviétique, l'URSS, la Turquie kémaliste et les réseaux de la diaspora arménienne.

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Of course, any omissions or mistakes are my own.

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### **Note on Translation and Transliteration**

All the translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Armenian words and names are transliterated according to the guidelines of the Library of Congress. In this dissertation, both Eastern and Western Armenians are used. Western Armenian was and still is used in Syria, while Eastern Armenian was used in Soviet Armenia as well as the modern Republic of Armenia. Actors, newspapers, and primary sources from both are used in this dissertation. I have retained the original transliteration. Western Armenian style is used while referring to names, works, and accounts produced in Syria and elsewhere in the diaspora (for example, I have used -ian for the surnames, “k” for “g”, “p” for “b”, “t” for “d”) and Eastern Armenian when it referred to names, and accounts in Soviet Armenia (for example, I have used -yan for the surnames).

The names in Arabic have been transliterated for the most part according to the guidelines of the *International Journal for Middle East Studies*. For the sake of simplicity, I have opted for English spelling, especially for the names of geographical locations. For example, Ras al-Ayn, and not Ra‘s al- ‘Ayn, Deir ez-Zor instead of Dayr al-Zor and Jazira instead of Jazire.

The names in Russian are transliterated according to the scheme of the Library of Congress.

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**For Joachim, Sophie, Romain, and my parents-in-law Catherine and Pierre Berney**





## Preface

Why Syria? Why Armenian refugees? This dissertation was in the making even before I was aware of it. It all started with my one-year-long study trip to Syria in 2005 as an undergraduate student to improve my Arabic language. It did not take me long to fall in love with that beautiful country and its rich culture. Almost every weekend, our language institute or a group of students organized excursions to discover the rich historical heritage. On April 24, 2005, one such journey took me to Deir ez-Zor, to the Armenian Genocide Museum and the church, where Armenians all over the world had arrived to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Genocide. The visit to the museum and the desert afterward, where one can still find the bones of the perished Armenians, left a profound impression on me. A few months later, with a group of fellow students, we decided to discover the Syrian Jazira beyond the Euphrates River.

One hot day in August 2005, I found myself on the banks of the Jaghjagh River, where endless watermelon fields spread before me. I was invited to taste the watermelon, and afterward, I would search for the same taste, never to find it again. That day changed my life forever. On the same day, in the evening, we visited Ras al-Ayn searching in vain for a sleeping place. Finally, as we became impatient and hopeless, we were advised to ask for shelter in the Armenian church. At that point, I had no idea that there were Armenian communities in this remote region, nor did I know that there were numerous other Christian villages.

When we arrived at the church, which stood proudly on a small hill, we found that many Armenian inhabitants of the village had come to greet us. They had already heard that an “Armenian girl” was there. It was very emotional to meet all these people, men and women of all ages, who warmly welcomed us as if we had known each other for a long time. That night we were hosted by Gevorg and his family, and a huge festive dinner was served in our honor. We slept under the open sky in Gevorg’s yard, which was a unique experience for me. My friends could not believe that I had just met these people for the first time. The few days spent in this special part of the world are etched in my memories in a particular way. I will never forget the emotions of that day, our meeting, and the faces of the curious Armenians of Ras al-Ayn who had come to welcome an Armenian girl from Armenia whom they did not know, who’s Armenian they could not understand, but with whom they felt somehow connected. I will never forget how they showed us around – the Khabur River, the border with Turkey, and the watermelon fields. Particularly memorable was the face of one of the villagers who posed

with his watermelons, asking us “to bring the photo to the world.” Since then, curiosity about the Armenian communities of the region did not leave me; who were these people? How and why did they end up there?

It is striking that, being Armenian myself, I had so little knowledge about the Armenian communities of Syria. My family roots are in Kars, from where my great grandparents fled in 1920, and I was sure I had no personal connection with Syria or the Armenian communities there. Then, I discovered that several of my professors at the State University of Yerevan were, in fact, from the Armenian community of Syria, while two were from Ras al-Ayn! Later, during my stay in Syria, I learned a lot about these communities and met more people who hailed from northern Syria. I had refused to learn about these Armenians because “I was in Syria to learn Arabic and discover Syrians, not the Armenians.” I refused to recognize how connected the histories of the Syrians and the Armenians had been (and still are). However, 12 years later, I was to embark on my Ph.D. journey to find out.

## Introduction: historical background

Syria has always occupied a special place in Armenian history.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, and until recently, it has been considered one of the most important diasporic centers. There are myriad reasons for such a prominent role. First, Syria has been home to ancient Armenian colonies for centuries, and Aleppo was an important trade center for many Anatolian Armenian families. Sadly, Syria was also one of the main deportation centers during the Armenian Genocide. The exodus and genocide of the Anatolian Armenians unfolding between 1914 and 1922 constitute one of the most significant instances of mass displacement and dispossession in the Ottoman lands.<sup>2</sup> According to different estimates, between 1.2 and 1.5 million Armenians were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to death marches by the ruling Ittihadists.<sup>3</sup> Most of the Armenians perished as a result of sickness, starvation, or exposure, or at the hands of their guards. Those who survived the marches were put in concentration camps without food, water, shelter, or sanitation.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the extermination of most of the Armenian deportees, known as the second phase of the Genocide, happened in Syrian territory.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here Syria refers to both historical Syria and modern-day Syria. Until World War I, Bilad al-Sham, or historical Syria, stretched from the Taurus Mountains in the south of Turkey, through the Alexandretta region, western Iraq, modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, to Palestine and the Israeli-occupied territories. Throughout this dissertation historical Syria is mentioned in the brackets “Syria,” while modern-day Syria without brackets.

<sup>2</sup>On the Armenian Genocide see: Taner Akcam, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha’s Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Taner Akcam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (Metropolitan books, 2007); Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Talat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Ronald Suny, *“They Can Live in the Desert But Nowhere Else:” A History of Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); David Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), Raymond Kévorkian, *Le genocide des Arméniens* (Odile Jacob 2006); Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995); Richard G. Hovannissian, *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> In 1908 the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) took over the power in Istanbul. Armenian population and their political elite supported them for they had claimed universal rights and equality for all the subjects. The enthusiasm did not last long. A further coup occurred in January 1913 and a single-party dictatorship was established by the Ittihadist central committee. Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2014); Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> More on the concentration camps, see Khatchadur Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1918* (Michigan State University Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Raymond H. Kévorkian, *L’extermination des déportés Arméniens Ottomans dans les Camps de Concentration de Syrie-Mésopotamie (1915-1916): La deuxième phase du Genocide*, special issue, *Revue d’histoire Arménienne contemporaine* 2, (Paris 1998); Khachadur Mouradian, “Genocide and Humanitarian Resistance in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1917,” (Unpublished PH.D diss., Clark University, 2016).

The massacres and deportations created refugee crises in Transcaucasia, the Balkans, and the Middle East involving thousands of destitute Armenian refugees.<sup>6</sup> In Syria, Aleppo became a major concentration center for the survivors. The French mandatory authorities estimated that approximately 200,000 Armenians had passed through the city, while 75,000 had resettled in the Aleppo province alone. Many others were resettled in the camps near Damascus and Beirut.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1920s, more Armenian refugees arrived in Syria in several successive waves. By 1925, there were 89,000 Armenian refugees in Syria, out of which 45,000 were in Aleppo.<sup>8</sup> This figure was significant, as Aleppo's population at that time counted for only 156,748 persons.<sup>9</sup> Aleppo was neither new nor unknown to most of these refugees. Artavazd Surmeyan, who was the head of the Armenian prelacy of Aleppo throughout most of the mandate years (1925–1941), claimed six centuries of uninterrupted Armenian presence in Aleppo prior to the arrival of the refugees.<sup>10</sup> Northern Syria and Cilicia, in particular, were home to Armenian populations for centuries. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, many Armenian lords were resettled there by the Byzantine rulers. In 1199, an Armenian Kingdom in Cilicia was created after a few ambitious Armenian soldiers had seized a number of fortresses. This Kingdom collapsed in 1375, leaving the area with numerous small Armenian-populated pockets that thrived into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Among them were the Alexandretta region, Beylan, Musa Ler (Jabal, or mountain), and Kessab.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There were 63,934 refugees in Greece; 15,889 in Bulgaria; 9,000 in Istanbul; 87,750 in Syria and Lebanon; 8,000 in Mesopotamia; 30,000 in France, while over 0.5 million in Transcaucasia; Archives of Délégation Nationale Arménienne de Paris (hereafter DNA), Nubar Library, Paris, fond Aram Antonian, 31 Decembre 1923.

<sup>7</sup> Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes, series Mandat Syrie-Liban (hereafter CADN-SL), 575, *Installation de réfugiés arméniens à Alep*, Beyrouth, 8 July 1940.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow of the Armenian Minority in the Arab Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 28:1 (1974), 19-32.

<sup>9</sup> "Halep Qaghaq" [Aleppo City], *Suriahay Taregirk* [The Armenian Syrian yearbook] (Cairo: Zareh Berberian, 1924), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Artavazd Surmeyan, *Patmutyun Halepi Hayotc* [The History of Armenians in Aleppo], (Aleppo: Ani 1940), 1:6.

<sup>11</sup> Before WWI the population of Cilicia counted around 400,000 persons, out of which about 200,000 Armenians, 78,000 Turks, 60,000 Kurds, and Turkmen, 15,000 Arabs, 20,000 Christian Syrians; Louis Jalabert, "Qua va devenir Cilicie," *Études*, 20 octobre 1921, 157-184, 160. In other Armenian sources the numbers of Armenians before 1914 are presented in more exaggerated numbers, for example, 407,000 out of 508,273 total Christians, in sanjak Adana, Khozan, Jebel Berekat, Marash and Casa el-Aintab in 1912, see in P. Nubar, *Population de la Cilicie avant la guerre* (Paris: Turabian (undated)), 2, 6; 380,000 Armenians in Cilicia in 1914, forming the 43,4% of the total population (857,604 persons), in K. J. Basmadjian, *La Cilicie, son passé et son avenir* (Paris, 1919), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandretta had 18,000 Armenians, Beylan 5,565, Musa Ler 6,000, and Kessab 6,000, in "Syria," *Hask*, January–February 1941, 24-28.

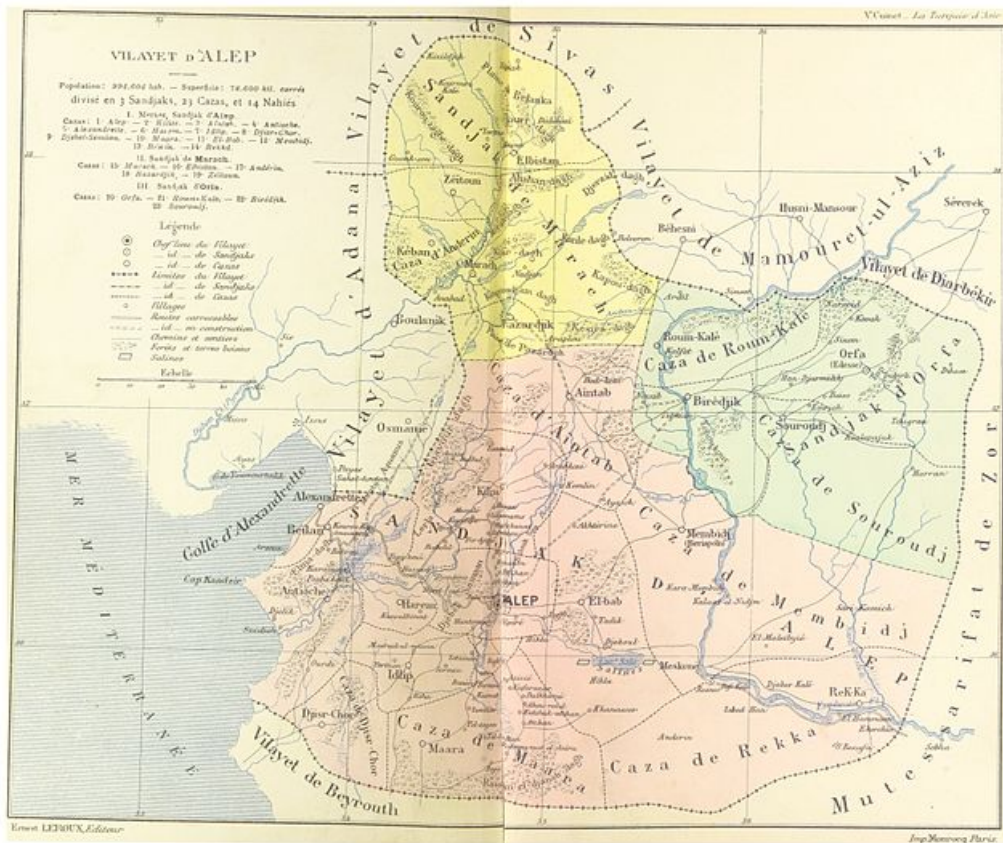


Figure 1. The Ottoman Aleppo vilayet: Source: Wikiwand

Of all these locations, Aleppo, in particular, had always been a special place for the Armenian community. It was an important trade center for the Armenians of Cilicia and Eastern Anatolia.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, the Ottoman Aleppo vilayet had included several regions of Cilicia with substantial Armenian populations.<sup>14</sup> Aleppo city had its own small Armenian community comprising about 10,000 non-refugee Armenians.<sup>15</sup> While in Alexandretta, Beylan, Musa Ler, and Kessab, Armenians had managed to preserve their language, this was not the

<sup>13</sup> More on Ottoman Aleppo, see Stefan Winter and Mafalda Ade, *Aleppo and its Hinterlands in the Ottoman Period/Alep et da province à l'époque ottoman* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020); Edhem Elden, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters, *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> There were about 75,000 Armenians in Kilis, Ayntap, and Urfa and 68,000 in Marash, Zeitun, and Fernuz before WWI, Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits Patmutyun Katoghikosoutyan Hayots Kilikio (1914-1972)* [The Contemporary History of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1914–1972] (Antelias, 1975), 175.

<sup>15</sup> Most of them were tradesmen. Since the end of the nineteenth century, these families lost their former prominent trade positions to the new local elites and served as intermediaries between the European and the local traders. Many were also artisans, backers, silk weavers, and painters. More on this, see Vahram L. Shemmassian, “The Sasun Pandukhts (Migrant Workers) in Nineteenth-Century Aleppo,” in *Armenian Baghesh/Bitlis and Taron/Mush*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001), 175-189.

case in Aleppo.<sup>16</sup> Not only had Aleppo been, for most of these refugees, their former provincial capital, but many had been there previously for business or to visit friends and family. Most Cilician Armenians also spoke Turkish, the language of the bazaars and public spaces of Aleppo.

Later, it was in modern-day Syria that Armenian national life and institutions, including church, schools, political parties, and diverse philanthropic organizations, were quickly established. Within a few years, Armenians were granted citizenship (1924) and voting rights (1925) and were gradually integrated into the local social and political life. Yet, Armenian refugees in Syria maintained a distinct Armenian identity and culture.

The new state of “Syria,” where these refugees found themselves was still in the making. Home to various religious and ethnic communities, modern-day Syria emerged as a result of partition plans between the British and French imperial powers, first by the Sykes-Picot agreement concluded in 1916, then in the form of mandates.<sup>17</sup> By the end of WWI, the new partition came to alter the administrative borders imposed by Ottoman rule for the past four centuries, dividing historical Syria into four new states: Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Palestine. This partition had little respect for the previous administrative divisions and its economic ties, resulting in the disintegration of traditional trade routes, and the circulation of goods and people.<sup>18</sup>

The partition was then legalized in the form of mandates administered by the League of Nations (LoN), itself a newly established body. The need for mandates over the people of the Middle East was stipulated in the founding Covenant of the LoN. It clearly stated that “the existence as an independent nation could now be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by the mandatory until such time as they (the people of the Middle East) are able to stand alone” as independent states.<sup>19</sup> In other words,

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<sup>16</sup> In Aleppo, Armenians were partially assimilated due to their adherence to Catholicism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The biggest weapon for conversion had traditionally been the opportunity for the youth to study in Europe. A. Surmeyan, *Patmutyun Halepi Hayotc*, vol. 3:70-72; vol. 2:422-423; Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 193.

<sup>17</sup> The Sykes–Picot agreement was concluded in May 1916 and foresaw the creation of French and British zones of direct rule and indirect influence. Palestine was to be made a special zone. The western coastal zone was to be governed by France, while the inland areas around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama by an Arab government.

<sup>18</sup> Border studies have shown that these were protracted processes, see Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, ed., *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022); Jordi Tejel *Rethinking State and Border Formation in the Middle East: Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands, 1921-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023). Schayegh has shown how the entire region remained undefined throughout the Ottoman period and later in terms of boundaries and multiple identities. Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 3–4, 41–48.

<sup>19</sup> [Http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20<sup>th</sup>\\_century/leagcov.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp). (Accessed on June 5, 2022)

mandates sought to prepare the nations “to govern themselves” through technical advice and assistance.

In Syria, the establishment of the French mandate was unpopular from the start. There were numerous reasons for opposing it. First, the French rule was imposed at the expense of the promised Arab self-rule. At the beginning of WWI, the British had entered into secret negotiations with Sharif Hussein of Mecca, encouraging him to revolt against Ottoman rule. In June 1916, the Arab Revolt erupted on the understanding that an independent Arab Caliphate would be recognized.<sup>20</sup> In reality, however, the British had sought to use the uprising to undermine Ottoman pan-Islamism.<sup>21</sup> On November 2, 1917, the British made yet another controversial commitment; pledging support to the establishment of a “Jewish national home” in Palestine.<sup>22</sup>

On October 1, 1918, four hundred years of Ottoman rule ended in Damascus when the Arab and British joined forces marched into the city, and shortly thereafter to Beirut, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. On October 3, Prince Faysal, the son of Hussein, made a triumphant entry into Damascus, riding a splendid Arabian horse. The 6,000-strong Arab army<sup>23</sup> was headed by two former Ottoman army officers – Nuri al-Sai‘d of Iraqi origin and Sargis Torossian of Armenian origin.<sup>24</sup> The establishment of the Arab Government in Syria was proclaimed by Faysal a few days later, on October 5.<sup>25</sup>

Syrians<sup>26</sup> were then invited to present their territorial claims at the Paris Peace Conference. In January 1919, Faysal, although not Syrian himself, represented the Syrians and submitted two Memorandums demanding independence for the Arabic-speaking people of Asia under the

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<sup>20</sup> The envisaged territories excluded Alexandretta and Mersin and lands lying to the west of Damascus, Homs, Hamah and Aleppo, as well as Baghdad and Basra. Sanjaks of Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre were not mentioned, in Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 55.

<sup>21</sup> David Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 135

<sup>22</sup> Longrigg suggests that such policy was to ensure the defense of Egypt and the East, to cover British railway and oil-line projects. Longrigg, *Syria*, 60; David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (Holt McDougal, Reprint, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Zeine mentions the number of the Arab forces 1500. Among them there were British, French (mostly Légion d’Orient,) and Arab divisions. Zeine N. Zeine, *Struggle for Arab Independence: Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of Faisal’s Kingdom in Syria* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1960), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Sargis Torossian was one of the few Christian officers in the Ottoman army, who had graduated from the State College of Adrianople, sent to Germany for a three-month training and was appointed to the commander of Fort Ertogrul, in the entrance of Dardanelles. After discovering that his family members were massacred, he left the Ottoman army in Palestine and joined the Arabic army fighting under Nuri Yousuf. Later he served in the Légion d’Orient. Sarkis Torossian, *From Dardanelles to Palestine: A True Story of Five Battle fronts of Turkey and her Allies and a Harem Romance* (Boston, Massachusetts, 1947).

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23. Original Arabic text, see in Sati‘ al-Husri, *Yawn Maisalun* [The Day of Maysalun] (Beirut, 1947), 194-195.

<sup>26</sup> I use the term “Syrians” throughout this dissertation to refer to the inhabitants of Syria without any distinction between religious and ethnic communities.



guarantee of LoN. A few days later, Faysal suggested sending a Neutral Commission of Inquiry, which was approved by the USA president Wilson.<sup>27</sup> This Commission, which became known by the name of its investigators, Henry King and Charles Crane, arrived in Jaffa in June 1919.<sup>28</sup> The Commission's arrival raised false hopes, giving the impression that the Syrian viewpoints would be considered in the final settlement.<sup>29</sup> The Commission confirmed the unfavorable attitude of most Syrians toward a French mandate.<sup>30</sup> Instead, most Syrians had clearly favored an American or British mandate. The preferences were based on i) Great Britain's dominant position in the Middle East, ii) the Wilsonian declarations of self-determination, and the economic power of the USA.<sup>31</sup> The Commission's findings angered the high-ranking French officials, who demanded Syria based on France's alleged economic, political and cultural influence in the region. Indeed, France's economic interests in the region had gradually increased since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the eve of WWI, France was, by far, the largest investor in the Ottoman Empire, including Syria, in the form of economic concessions and loans, which amounted to at least 200 million French francs in Syria alone.<sup>32</sup>

It was, therefore, no accident that the Commission's report was not published until 1922, well after France was awarded the mandate in April 1920.<sup>33</sup> Faysal was defeated in July 1920 by the French forces on the outskirts of Damascus, four months after he was enthroned as King of Syria. Thus, it was obvious that the European powers did not desire Syrian independence and that Syrians regarded the imposed French mandate as the "wrong" one. Throughout the

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth F. Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (Grove Press UK, 2020); Zeine, *The Struggle*.

<sup>28</sup> It was supposed to be an international mission, nevertheless, France withdrew claiming that the Syrian question had already been settled by the agreements. Great Britain was obliged to withdraw too. In the end, only the American delegation arrived.

<sup>29</sup> Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East, Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 151.

<sup>30</sup> Zeine, *The Struggle*, 95; Michel Paillarès, *Le Kémalisme devant les alliés* (Le cercle d'écrits Cauc., 2005), 5.

<sup>31</sup> On national self-determination, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Eric D. Weitz, "Self-Determination: How a German Enlightenment Idea Became the Slogan of National Liberation and a Human Right," *American Historical Review*, vol. 120:2 (2015), 462–496.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Thobie, *Intérêts et Impérialisme Français dans l'Empire Ottoman 1895-1914* (Paris, 1977); Gonton-Biron, *Comment la France s'est installée en Syrie (1918-1919)* (Pranava Books, India, undated), 9.

<sup>33</sup> There is extensive literature on the mandates, here is a non-exhaustive list, Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michael D. Callahan, *A Sacred Trust: The League of Nations and Africa, 1929-1946* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004); Veronique Dimier, "L'internationalisation du débat colonial: Rivalités Franco-Britanniques autour de la Commission Permanente des Mandats," *Outre-mers*, vol. 89 (2002), 333-360; Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015); on French-British differences, see Peter Sluglett and Nadine Meouchy, "Les mandats/the Mandates," in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. idem (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

inter-war years, nationalism in Syria was, therefore, primarily marked by the struggle for independence.

It is noteworthy that Georges-Picot, who arrived in Beirut in November 1918 as “The High Commissioner of Syria and Armenia,” sent an urgent appeal one week later, demanding the immediate arrival of 20,000 French troops “to save France’s position in Syria.”<sup>34</sup> When, a year later, the new French High Commissioner General Gouraud arrived in Beirut, a major guerilla uprising against French rule was already underway in northern Syria. It was led by Ibrahim Hanano, a wealthy land owner and a holder of several governmental positions in Aleppo,<sup>35</sup> and his close ally Artashes Poghikian.<sup>36</sup> The revolt would continue throughout 1921.

In the face of popular uprisings against the European imposed rule, increasing unpopularity of colonialism in the European capitals, and the French and British desire to secure economic and political interests in the Middle East, the mandates system was proposed as a new undercover form of European dominance.<sup>37</sup> The international laws established after WWI foresaw interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states based on racial and civilizational exceptions.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the need for trusteeships, tutelage, and mandates was justified. The LoN was created and entrusted to oversee the mandate systems and enforce “minority protection” clauses to guarantee the fundamental rights of those who did not fit into the new nation-states.<sup>39</sup> In the aftermath of WWI, the nation-state model, preferably with a homogeneous ethnic composition, was considered the basis for lasting peace.<sup>40</sup> The new

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<sup>34</sup> E. Brémond, *Le Cilicie en 1919-1920* (Imprimerie nationale, 1921), 307-308, cited in Zeine, *Struggle*, 49; E. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> More on Hanano, see in James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 133, Adham Al-Jundi, *Tarikh al-thawrat al-suriyya fi ‘Ahd al-Intidab al-Faransi* [History of the Syrian Revolts under the French Mandate] (Damascus: Matba’atu al-Ittihad, 1960), 74-76; Nadine Méouchy, “Les temps et les territoires de la révolte du Nord (1919-1921)” in *Alep et ses territoires: fabrique et politique d’une ville (1868-2011)*, ed., Jean-Claude David et Thierry Boissière (Presses de l’IFPO, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> More on this collaboration see “Artashes Poghikian” *Suria*, July 4, 1947, and “Artashes Poghikian: Hanano’s Right Hand,” *Al-Jumhur al-arabiy*, September 13, 1954, cited in Geghard (Aleppo, 1994), 124-125.

<sup>37</sup> Nadine Méouchy, ed., *France, Syrie et Liban, 1918-1946: Les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire* (Damas: IFEAD, 2002); Peter Sluglett et al. *The British and French Mandates*; Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate* (I.B. Tauris, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Davide Rodogno, *Night on the Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 8.

<sup>39</sup> For a critical view, that such clauses were created for the first time to ensure the political and economic dominance of the West, and not out of humanitarian concerns, see Mark Mazower, “The End of Civilization and the Rise of Human Rights: The Mid-twentieth Century Disjuncture,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed., Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); D. Rodogno, *Night on Earth*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17. By doing so, this system ultimately justified the uprooting and ethnic unmixing by population exchanges as a lasting solution. The most notorious case is the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. See Rogers Brubaker, “Aftermath of Empire and the Unmixing of People,” in *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet*

mandate regimes were, thus, a fresh cover for Western colonial ambitions. The LoN soon adopted the vocabulary of ethnic, religious, and national difference (as was the case previously with that of “minorities”) as a way to legitimize the mandate rule in the Arab countries and to define the superiority of its oversight over the British and French mandatory authorities.<sup>41</sup> Syria would gain its independence only in April 1946.

The Syrians were not, however, the only people whose national aspirations were not met in the aftermath of WWI; the Armenians were not fortunate either.<sup>42</sup> Like the Syrians, the Armenians were invited to present their territorial claims at the Paris Peace Conference. To this end, two separate Armenian delegations arrived in Paris to represent the Eastern (Russian) and Western (Ottoman) Armenians, respectively. This duality reflected the division of the historical homeland of the Armenian people between the two neighboring expansionist Empires – the Ottoman and the Imperial Russian, for which Armenian lands served as a borderland or a “shatter zone.”<sup>43</sup> At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the eastern regions of Armenia remained under Russian rule and the Western regions, which formed the greatest part, under Ottoman rule.<sup>44</sup>

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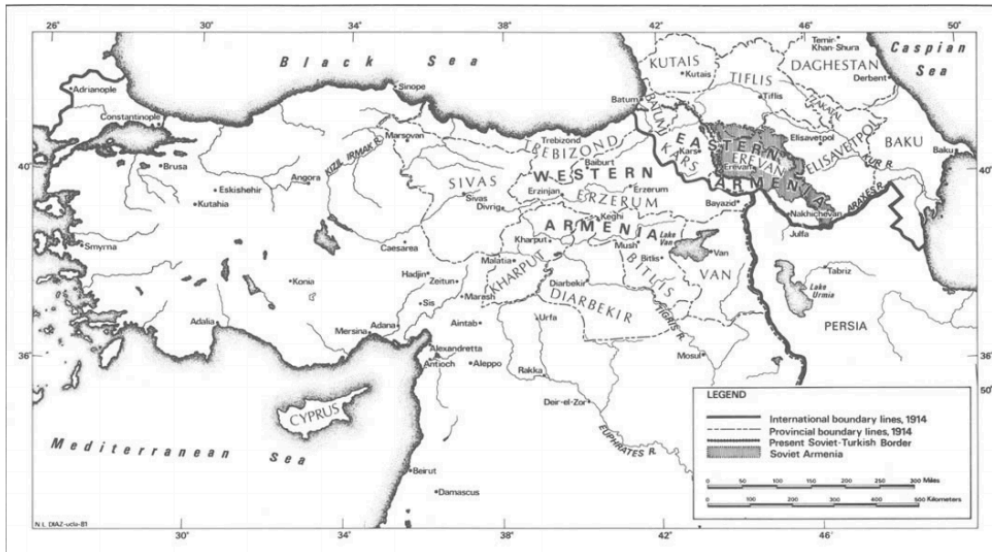
*Union and the Russians, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires*, ed. Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 155-180.

<sup>41</sup> Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 30; Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> It must be said that Kurds and Assyrians were not fortunate either.

<sup>43</sup> After the collapse of the Armenian kingdom (12<sup>th</sup> cent.), the territories of Armenia served as an arena of constant warfare until the 17<sup>th</sup> century between the Persian and Ottoman Empires, then between the Russian and Ottoman Empires. I borrow this term from Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, ed., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013). For literature that frames borderlands as zones of violence, Michael Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908- 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alfred Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> These were six Armenian vilayets in the Ottoman Empire: Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Harput, Sivas, Erzurum, Van.



The Armenian Homelands in Modern and Contemporary Times

Figure 2. The Armenian Homelands in Modern and Contemporary Times. Source: R. G. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide: History, Poetics, Ethics* (London: MacMilan, 1992), xxiv.

In both the Ottoman and Russian Empires, the Armenians were recognized as a religious community. In the Ottoman Empire, in particular, belonging was not defined by the territory alone but rather by the inclusion in a certain social community – a *millet* based on religious, linguistic, and cultural characteristics.<sup>45</sup> The Armenians were allowed to have their so-called “national constitution” or “statutes” and an Assembly attached to the Patriarchate in Istanbul.<sup>46</sup> Neither the constitution nor the *millet* were tied to any specific territory but were based on community institutions and reflected the Armenian non-territorial imagination of their community. In the Russian Empire, a similar statute, *Polozhenie*, was awarded to them in 1836.

Since, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenians had been oppressed in both the Ottoman and Russian Empires, a widespread nationalistic mood, coupled with the fact that many well-off Armenian youths had been acquainted with the ideas of liberation and human rights while studying abroad, led to the emergence of the first modern political parties.

<sup>45</sup> The *millet* system allowed the Ottoman rulers to efficiently organize the empire’s population into communities by devolving power to trusted intermediaries and community leaders. There were three basic millets: Greek, Jewish, and Armenian. Karen Barkey and George Gavrilis, “The Ottoman Millet System: Non-territorial Autonomy and its Contemporary Legacy,” *Ethnopolitics* 15:1 (2016), 24-42; Kemal Karput “Millets and Nationality. The Roots of the Incongruity of Nations and State in the Post-Ottoman Era,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. B. Braude and B. Lewis (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), vol. 1, 141-170.

<sup>46</sup> The so-called constitution, was in reality a set of regulations for internal administration. V. Artinian, *Armenian Constitutional System in the Ottoman Empire, 1839-1863: A Study of its Historical Development* (Istanbul: Artinian, 1988); Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 150.

Armenakan, Social Democratic Henschak Party (or Henschak), and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, also known as Dashnaktyutsyun) emerged.<sup>47</sup> Later, Armenakan reemerged as the Ramkavar Liberal Party (Ramkavar). Among them, the ARF was the most organized and became the ruling party in the First Armenian Republic. Later, all these parties were active among the refugees. At the beginning of the 1920s, a fourth ideology – communism – emerged.

The Paris Peace Conference failed to deliver the promised Ottoman Armenian vilayets for the construction of a United and Free Armenia, despite numerous verbal promises. Although a map of Armenia was drawn by president Wilson to reclaim the six Ottoman Armenian provinces (without Cilicia) (the Wilsonian Armenia) as per the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), it would remain on paper only. Meanwhile, a tiny Armenian Republic was established in May 1918 in the South Caucasus on territories formerly controlled by Imperial Russia. The establishment of the Armenian state was controversial and not well regarded by most Ottoman Armenians, who feared it would hinder the creation of a United Armenia, including the Ottoman provinces.

The discussions over creating a United Armenia were intimately connected with the discussions over the mandate. Unlike their Syrian counterparts, who were categorically against any mandate, Armenians wished to have a mandatory oversight from the start. This was justified by the lack of experience in running a state and the dire economic conditions.<sup>48</sup> Like their Syrian counterparts, the Armenians, too, would accept the British, who at that point controlled the entire Caucasus, and especially favored the Americans, given the Wilsonian engagement with the Armenian cause, but were not in support of a French mandate.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the Armenians did not consider the different mandates to be mutually exclusive, as illustrated by Natanian, a prominent intellectual from Aleppo: “It is the British who will be responsible for our political protection, the French for internal organization, and the Americans for the

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<sup>47</sup> Armenakan was created in 1885, later it merged with other small groups in 1908 and in 1921, reemerging as the Ramkavar Liberal Party. Henschak was formed in Geneva in 1887 by a number of Russian Armenian students to achieve independence for the Ottoman Armenian provinces. ARF was founded in Tiflis in 1890 to achieve a certain degree of autonomy for the Ottoman Armenian provinces. Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties Through the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963). For critical analyses on the “revolutionary” character of these organizations, see Gerard Libaridian, “What Was Revolutionary about Armenian Revolutionary Parties in the Ottoman Empire?” in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the end of the Ottoman Empire*, ed., Ronald Suny, Fatma Müge Göcek, Norman M. Naimark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 82-112. Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 72-79.

<sup>48</sup> Vahan Papazian, *Im Husheres* [My Memoirs], (Cairo: Husaber, 1957), 3:90; Avetis Aghamyan, *From Sardarabat to Sevres and Lausanne: Political Diary* (Glendale, Calif: ARF Centennial Committee, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> Paillarès, *Le Kémalisme*, 15.

economic revival.”<sup>50</sup> It was apparent that the extent of the ongoing competition between the Allied forces and the dangers that it posed were not yet wholly grasped by the Armenian elite.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, the Armenian political elite in Paris was influenced by different Western power representatives in formulating their territorial claims. For example, they were told that the USA would be more inclined to accept a mandate for Armenia if it occupied extensive territories. Thus, the memorandum submitted to the American Senate claimed territories from the Caucasus to Cilicia.<sup>52</sup> In fact, such claims were first pushed by the American and British representatives, who insisted that “Armenia must be given a port on the Mediterranean.”<sup>53</sup> It can safely be said that the immense territorial claims put forward by the Armenian delegation were in reality imposed on the latter by the Allies themselves, who wished to detach these territories from the Ottoman Empire and govern them under the cover of an “Armenian mandate.” In reality, the Armenians and their attempts to achieve independence were of secondary importance. These new boundaries, however, violated prewar agreements, according to which France was granted rights over the whole of Cilicia, as well as much of Harput and Diyarbekir; but now these territories were claimed by Armenia (or by the British and Americans on their behalf). Syrian preference for the American or British mandate was another layer. It was only natural that France felt its position in the region threatened. On December 27, 1918, former French Premier Aristide Briand announced in the Chamber of Deputies that war-time agreements ought to be honored. Two days later, Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon made a speech that was not only intended to pressurize the Armenians but had deplorable consequences – the massacres of the Armenian refugees in Aleppo two months later, which are discussed in this dissertation.

While the mandate the Syrians hated was eventually imposed on them, the mandate desired by the Armenians never materialized. Matters became worse when, in December 1920, the Armenian government handed over power to the Soviet regime in the face of renewed Turkish advances. Within a few years, Soviet power was gradually established over almost all of the former Russian Empire, including Armenia. The Sovietization of Armenia not only further isolated it but also divided the Armenian communities and refugees outside Soviet

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<sup>50</sup> Mikayel Natanian, “Mistake,” in *Hay Dzayn*, December 23, 1918, 1.

<sup>51</sup> On the French-British rivalry, see James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011). In relation to the Armenians, see Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia, the First Year, 1918-1919*, vol. I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

<sup>52</sup> G. Pastermadjian, “Armenia and her claims to freedom and national independence” Memorandum submitted to the American Senate, document N:316, Washington 1919. <https://archive.org/details/armeniaandhercl00sevagoog/page/n2/mode/2up> (accessed on February 18, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> Charles Seymour, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. IV (Boston, New York, 1928), 129; cited in Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, 262-263.

Armenia, who faced a dilemma as to whether to recognize the Bolshevik authority in Armenia or not. Not only did the desire of the Western powers to annex new territories from Turkey for Soviet Armenia vanish, but the political situation and the alliances rapidly changed, too.

The peace treaty signed with Turkey in Lausanne in July 1923 did not leave room for a liberated Armenia. However, although the Armenian-populated provinces would never be claimed from defeated Turkey, the Allies promised the Armenian leaders the creation of a so-called “Armenian home” to settle the surviving Ottoman Armenians. The possible locations for such a home were considered to be Cilicia, where France attempted to create a puppet state modeled on Lebanon, and, after ceding Cilicia to Turkey in 1921, the Syrian-Turkish borderlands. Understandably, both the USSR and Soviet Armenia regarded the establishment of any such “home” with hostility, assuming that it would be an imperialist outpost directed at the USSR. At this point, the USSR was not recognized internationally and remained largely isolated until its recognition by the USA in 1933, so its fears were arguably exaggerated. The wider international context, as well as the regional geopolitical factors, also played a role.

Syria hosted the largest Armenian refugee community outside Soviet space, who were regrouped and lived “in front of the gates of Cilicia,” their former homeland. This is why major Armenian refugee gatherings on the Syrian-Turkish borderlands were not regarded well by the Soviet authorities. Although by the mid-1920s, all the talks about establishing such a home had been abandoned, the Soviet fears did not vanish.

This dissertation investigates the “Armenian home” in Syria and the connections between the Armenian refugee settlements in Syria and the repatriations initiated by Soviet Armenia. This, together with citizenship and voting rights and the Armenian participation in the Syrian Revolt (1925–1926), form the backbone of this dissertation.

## Literature Review

The French mandate in Syria has been studied from various perspectives. Until the late 1980s, the traditional historiography of Syria was dominated by two major narratives: the colonial (the imposed mandates) and the local elite resistance (elite nationalism).<sup>54</sup> An emerging new corpus

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<sup>54</sup> Longrigg, *Syria*; George Antonius, *Arab Awakening: The Story of the National Arab Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938); Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Ernest Dawn, “From Ottomanism to Arabism: the Origin of an Ideology,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 23:3, (July 1961), 378-400; P. S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: the Politics of Damascus, 1860-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); E. Dawn, “The Origins of Arab Nationalism” in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Rashid Khalidi, and al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3-31; Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). The exceptions are

of works over the last two decades has begun to move in more analytical directions Rashid Khalidi's and James Gelvin's studies offer ground-breaking contributions to our understanding of local nationalist politics driven by popular and non-elite masses in sharp contrast to the earlier works.<sup>55</sup> Michael Provence's book on the Syrian Revolt is another attempt to explain historical, social, economic, commercial, and family ties between the rural and urban regions and their influence on nationalist politics from the late Ottoman times to the mandate period.<sup>56</sup>

During the last two decades, in particular, a new generation of scholars has sought to extend the fields and actors under study, moving away from notables, nationalists, and state institutions to consider other, less studied, and often marginalized subaltern groups and their roles in the shaping of the nascent nation-states. This includes renewed research on specific cities and regions and their inhabitants, minorities, women, the middle-class, refugees, humanitarian institutions, diasporas, and environmental factors.<sup>57</sup>

The rise of border-studies scholarship has offered a new perspective, too. Vahé Tachjian's work on Cilicia and Upper Mesopotamia scrutinizes the border region between Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, pointing to French alliances with the ethnic minorities of the area to advance their colonial agenda.<sup>58</sup> In a valuable chapter on the Syrian Jazira, along the Syrian-Turkish border, he sheds light on how the Armenian and Kurdish refugees who settled there were caught between the Syrian and Turkish nation-building efforts. He also illuminates the history of the Armenian-Kurdish secret cooperation in the framework of the Khoybun alliance.<sup>59</sup> The Khoybun alliance has also been studied in detail by another historian, Jordi

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Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Khoury, "The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism: Interwar Syria Revisited," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. James Jankowski et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 273–287.

<sup>55</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Rashid Khalidi, "The Press as a Source for Modern Arab Political History: Abd Al-Ghani Al-'Uraisi and Al-Mufid," in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol.3:1 (1981), 22-42; James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 7, 288.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East*; Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014); Alan Mikhail, *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012); Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (State University of New York Press, 2017); Stacy D. Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); to name but a few.

<sup>58</sup> Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie : aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak, 1919-1933* (Karthala : Paris, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 354.



Tejel.<sup>60</sup> In his research on the Syrian Jazira, Tejel explores the origins and impact of the autonomist movement during the pre-independence formative years of 1936–1939. He shows how the movement, largely a response to the Syrian state expansion and consolidation, paradoxically, resulted in the “Syrianization” of the region.<sup>61</sup> In another work on Syria’s Kurds, Tejel explains the striking and often contradictory Kurdish articulations for their tribal, local, regional, and national identities, the emergence of Kurdish nationalism, and the formation of the Kurdish “minority” once again in response to the consolidating Syrian state.<sup>62</sup> Tejel has also devoted several important articles to the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi borderlands offering a different, decentred and bottom-up approach far from nation-state and methodological nationalism. He does so by analyzing the different aspects of the border-making processes. For example, the important roles played by the border populations in the delimitation of the Turkish-Iraqi border; the role of the rumors in the consolidation of the state presence in the borderlands, the women who crossed the Syrian-Turkish border, and others who were exchanged with stolen sheep, or the complex relationships of Syria’s Kurds with the Syrian borders.<sup>63</sup>

In the same vein, Ramazan Hakki Öztan has examined the responses of the Turkish authorities to the increase in smuggling circuits across the Syrian-Turkish border by introducing new legislation and border policing.<sup>64</sup> His other works are devoted to the roles played by rumors, regional trade and the politics of tariffs, and Turkish nationalism.<sup>65</sup>

In these works, special attention is devoted to the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi borderland, a region famous under the name of Syrian Jazira. This region is also central to my dissertation since the most successful rural settlements of the Armenian refugees took place there.

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<sup>60</sup> Jordi Tejel Gorgas, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); Jordi Tejel, “The Last Ottoman Rogues: The Kurdish-Armenian Alliance in Syria and the New State-System in the Interwar Middle East,” in *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries, and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires*, ed. Ramazan Hakki Öztan and Alp Yenen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 355-382.

<sup>61</sup> Jordi Tejel, “Les territoires de marge de la Syrie mandataire : le mouvement autonomiste de la Haute Jazîra, paradoxes et ambiguïtés d’une intégration « nationale » inachevée (1936-1939),” *REMMM*, No. 126 (2009b).

<sup>62</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>63</sup> Jordi Tejel, “Making Borders from Below: The Emergence of the Turkish-Iraqi Frontier, 1918-1925,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 54:5, (2018), 811-826; “Des femmes contre des moutons: franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929-1944),” *20&21. Revue d’histoire*, vol. 145, 35-47; Jordi Tejel, “States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925–1945,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 37:1 (2020), 95-113; Tejel, “The Complex and Dynamic Relationship of Syria’s Kurds with Syrian Borders: Continuities and Changes,” in *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State*, ed. Matthieu Cimino, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 243-267.

<sup>64</sup> Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish-Syrian Border, 1921-1939,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 52:2 (2020), 311-326.

<sup>65</sup> Öztan, “The Last Ottoman Merchants: Regional Trade and Politics of Tariffs in Aleppo’s Hinterland, 1921-1929,” in *Regimes of Mobility*, 319-350; Öztan, “Settlement Law of 1934: Turkish Nationalism in the Age of Revisionism,” *Journal of Migration History*, vol. 6:1, 82-103. Öztan, “Republic of Conspiracies: Cross-Border Plots and the Making of Modern Turkey, 1919-1939,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (Online, April 2020).

The environmental history of the Syrian Jazira and the fight against locusts that rendered it a welcoming refugee settlement site has been studied by Samuel Dolbee.<sup>66</sup> In another work, Dolbee shows how referring to refugee movements as “floods,” “waves,” and “plagues of locusts” helped state authorities to prove that the removal of the entire group was a necessity, as the Young Turks did during the Armenian Genocide.<sup>67</sup> Other environmental factors and the French tribal policies have been addressed, too.<sup>68</sup> The trans-desert routes that crisscrossed the Syrian Desert and their role in the formation and consolidation of the Syrian (as well as Iraqi) state and their borders have been equally captured.<sup>69</sup>

The above-mentioned border studies are often closely linked to refugee studies. In the past decade, the 20th-century refugee histories of Europe and the Middle East have enjoyed renewed interest.<sup>70</sup> Most recent studies draw their inspiration chiefly from the histories of marginalized groups, often informed by the challenge of methodological nationalism as well as transnational and global histories.<sup>71</sup> Yet, despite the growing body of research and the past and

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<sup>66</sup> Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023); Dolbee, “The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects, and Disease in the Late Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860–1940,” (Unpublished Ph.D diss. New York University, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> Samuel Dolbee, “The Desert at the End of Empire: An Environmental History of the Armenian Genocide,” *Past & Present*, vol. 247:1 (2020), 197–233; R.G. Suny, “They Can Live in the Desert; More on the usage of similar metaphors, see Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 200.

<sup>68</sup> On caravan trade in the interwar period, see Philippe Pétriat, “The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (2021), 273–290. On nomadism and the adaptation of Bedouin societies to the historical developments of the early twentieth century, see Robert Fletcher, *British Imperialism and ‘The Tribal Question’: Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mehdi Sakatni, “From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes during the French Mandate (1920–46),” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), 159–169; Laura Stocker, “The ‘Camel Dispute’: Cross-border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929-1934,” in *Regimes of Mobility*, 319–350, see also Stocker’s forthcoming Ph.D dissertation.

<sup>69</sup> Simon Jackson, “Introduction: The Global Middle East in the Age of Speed: From Joyriding to Jamming, and from Racing to Raiding,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 30:1 (2019), 111–115; Kristin Monroe, “Automobility and Citizenship in Interwar Lebanon,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 34:3 (2014), 518–531; César Jaquier, “Motor Cars and Transdesert Traffic: Channelling Mobilities between Iraq and Syria, 1923-1930,” in *Regimes of Mobility*, 228-255; Jaquier, “Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings: A History of the Baghdad-Damascus Route, 1923-1939,” (Unpublished Ph.D diss., University of Neuchâtel, 2022).

<sup>70</sup> Some of this work on European refugees include: Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee, ed., *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch, ed., *Refugees in Twentieth-Century Europe: the Forty Years’ Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Simone Lässig and Jan C. Jansen, eds., *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000: Political and Societal Responses in International Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Tomasz Pudlocki and Kamil Ruszala, ed., *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918-1923* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Delphine Diaz, *En exil: les réfugiés en Europe, de la fin du XVIII siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Folio: 2021). For a full list and mapping out the field, see Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, “What is refugee history, now?” *Journal of Global History*, vol. 17:1 (2022), 1-19.

<sup>71</sup> Several works, in particular, have been influential: Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 91:3 (1986), 1053–75; Lynn M. Thomas, “Historicising Agency,” *Gender and History*, vol. 28:2 (2016), 324-339; Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 11:3 (1996), 377- 404; Pekka Hämäläinen,

ongoing projects that aim to historicize the so-called “refugee crisis,” refugee studies still lack a shared conceptual framework.<sup>72</sup> Here, I focus solely on the Middle East, with a particular focus on the Armenian refugees.<sup>73</sup> Most new studies have highlighted the central roles played by “the late Ottoman experience in the making of modern *refugeedom*, in general, and that of the Middle East, in particular.”<sup>74</sup> The new emerging body of literature often interacted with the critical readings on humanitarian assistance provided to the Armenian refugees in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>75</sup> Adapting the orientalist critique of Edward Said, Jo Laycock showed how orientalist discourse informed not only the image of the Armenian refugee but also the nature and the practice of humanitarian relief.<sup>76</sup> The rise and transformation of modern humanitarian assistance from faith-based missionary works to secular projects, including in developmental projects have been studied, too.<sup>77</sup>

The interaction of the refugees with the mandatory authorities, their categorization, the creation of permits and passports, “minoritization,” and other mandatory policies have been equally captured.<sup>78</sup> Several works have studied French refugee settlement policies in Syria.

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“Reconstructing the Great Plains: The Long Struggle for Sovereignty and Dominance in the Heart of the Continent,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, vol. 6:4, (2016), 481-509; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, “Discussion: The Futures of Global History,” *Journal of Global History*, 13:1 (2018), 1–21; Jeremy Adelman, “What is global history now?.” On methodological nationalism, see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks* 2:4 (2002), 301–34.

<sup>72</sup> For a useful discussion on the literature, the representations of a “refugee” and his absence from the core discussions, see Lauren Banko, et al. “What is refugee,” 3. As rightly noticed by the authors although the term “refugee crisis” began to appear in the Western media since 2014, it had already been used two decades earlier.

<sup>73</sup> Early works on the Armenian refugees in Syria include Thomas H. Greenshield, “The Settlement of Armenian Refugees in Syria and Lebanon, 1915-1939” (Unpublished Ph.D diss., Durham University, 1978); R. Hovannisian, “The Ebb; Ara Sanjian “The Armenian Minority Experience in the Modern Arab World,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies*, Vol. 3:1 2001, 149-179.

<sup>74</sup> For a full list on the Ottoman settlement policies, aid practices, nomadic sedentarization policies, land conflicts as well as Empire’s assimilation and demographic engineering policies, see Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “Introduction,” *Journal of Migration History*, vol. 6:1 (February 2020).

<sup>75</sup> Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire. Les acteurs européens et la scène proche-orientale pendant l’entre-deux-guerres*, (Sorbonne, Paris, 2004); Chris Gratien, “The Sick Mandate of Europe: Local and Global Humanitarianism in French Cilicia, 1918-1922,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association*, vol. 3:1 (2016).

<sup>76</sup> Joanne Laycock, *Imagining Armenia: Orientalism, Ambiguity and Intervention 1878-1925*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*, (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015); Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth*; Rodogno, “Beyond Relief: A Sketch of the Near East Relief’s Humanitarian Operations, 1918-1929,” *Monde(s)* vol. 2:6 (2014), 45-64. For a classical account depicting the refugees as “problems” suggesting developmental “solutions,” see Sir John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939); for the critique of the survey authored by Simpson suggesting a connection between the survey and the category-making to define the refugees, see Anne Schult, “Interwar Statistics, Colonial Demography, and the Making of the Twentieth-century Refugee,” *Journal of Global History*, (2022), 1-21.

<sup>78</sup> White, *The Emergence*; Laura Robson, ed., *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives* (Syracuse University Press, 2016); Lauren Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918-1947* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Aline Schlaeper, Philippe Bourmaud et al. ed., *Fantômes d’Empire: Persistances et revendications d’ottomanité(s) dans les espaces post-ottomans* (PU: Provence, 2021); Vladimir

Ellen Lust-Okar, for one, argued that Armenian refugees were “compradorial agents of rule” in the Levant for the French, assuming static cooperation between the French mandatory authorities and the refugees.<sup>79</sup> According to her, this cooperation failed because of the high costs for both sides. Watenpaugh challenged this assumption, calling for consideration of the views and roles of the refugees too. In his article on the “survivor’s bargain,” he argued that the “ambiguous and vulnerable status of the Armenians in Syria forced the community to mobilize political and cultural resources and accept governmental and non-governmental paternal and, albeit often-altruistic aid, to survive.”<sup>80</sup> He further argued that, in return for their cooperation with the social, political, intellectual, and economic processes of imperialism, the Armenian community received material and discursive support enabling it to be integrated into the legal, political, economic, and urban structures of Syria.<sup>81</sup> This article, written almost 20 years ago, undoubtedly intended to showcase the complexity of the relations (resistance, cooperation, and accommodation) between the colonial power and the natives, including the refugees challenging Okar’s account. Instead, Watenpaugh aimed to restore an agency to the Armenian refugees by claiming that they were not the passive recipients of French paternalism; instead, they were active actors in the negotiation and reformulation of their role in the colonial encounter.<sup>82</sup> Yet, in the three historical instances chosen by him to show that “bargain,” he assumed that the entire Armenian community did cooperate with the French but not in the way that the French had hoped for; therefore, the once comprador-client status did not exist.

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Hamed-Troyansky, “Circassian Refugees and the Making of Amman, 1878–1914,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 49:4 (2017), 605–623. The documentation of status and mobility control was not completely new, as passports and internal travel documents became increasingly widespread in the late Ottoman period. David Gutman, “Travel Documents, Mobility Control, and the Ottoman State in an Age of Global Migration, 1880–1915,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association*, vol. 3:2 (2016), 347–368; İlkey Yılmaz, “Governing the Armenian Question through Passports in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876–1908),” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 32:4 (2019), 388–403. Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> Ellen Marie Lust-Okar, “Failure of Collaboration: Armenian Refugees in Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 32:1, (1996), 53–68, 53.

<sup>80</sup> Watenpaugh, “Towards a New Category of Colonial Theory: Colonial Cooperation and the Survivors’ Bargain: The Case of the Post-Genocide Armenian Community of Syria under French Mandate” in *The British and French*, ed. Peter Sluglett et al., 597–622, 602, Watenpaugh argued it after Kandiyoti’s concept of “patriarchal bargain,” Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” *Gender and Society*, vol. 2:3 (1988), 274–290.

<sup>81</sup> Watenpaugh, “Towards a New,” 603.

<sup>82</sup> These instances were 1. the formation and vilification of the Légion arménienne; 2. The rescue operations of the Armenian orphans and girls from Muslim households; 3. The massive building projects replaced the bidonvilles/refugee camps with paved streets and good middle-class homes. In the first case, he concluded that ‘the once comprador-client status envisaged by the French faded, as did the relative value of Armenians to the colonial enterprise. (608). In the second case, he concluded ‘The French had very little to gain in Syria after the withdrawal from Cilicia and the collapse of the Légion (612) The third argument is related to the elections and making the Armenians an independent electoral constituency, thus the need to move them from the camps to urban spaces... providing them with property, a trade, or a profession in a way that intensified their linkage with the French state. Watenpaugh, “Towards a New,” 618, 619.

Nicola Migliorino's work offers an insightful account of the Armenian community's political and cultural organizations, showing the transformation of the unorganized refugees into a community. He attributed this success to the Armenian determination and "non-assimilatory communal solidarity," without considering the roles of the external players.<sup>83</sup> Refugee settlements in the "buffer zones" and their roles in the state-building projects have been equally well captured. Laura Robson, for instance, has shown how British and French colonial authorities settled refugee populations in remote, so-called "empty" places in an attempt to establish state authority. She argued that refugee management became a major *raison d'être* for the LoN and the British and French mandate authorities alike.<sup>84</sup>

The emergence of the Syrian Jazira as an important refugee settlement site and its impact on the construction of the Syrian state has been studied, albeit as a purely French colonial undertaking. Seda Altuğ has demonstrated how the settlement of the refugees and the Armenians, in particular, was regarded by the Syrian nationalist press as "the violation of the sanctity of the Syrian body and national-self" while the refugees were viewed as French "colons."<sup>85</sup> She also documented the discourse of the Syrian nationalists who compared the Armenian newcomers with the "Zionist settlers in Palestine."<sup>86</sup> Although Altuğ does provide some responses put forward by the Armenian refugee leaders and the press organs, it is not clear why an "Armenian home" in Jazira, why the timing was such, and why it alarmed the Syrian nationalists in the way it did. For Altuğ, who based her analyses on extensive interviews conducted in Syria, it was, first of all, to show that neither the Arab nationalist press of the 1920s nor the local population was as welcoming and tolerant towards the refugees as the histories and memories written later claimed. Although she admitted that the relations between Christian refugees and Muslim hosts were far from being one-dimensional and "took different forms according to region, class, politics, and other factors,"<sup>87</sup> she failed to provide evidence

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<sup>83</sup> Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crises* (New York: Berghan Books, 2008), 46.

<sup>84</sup> Robson, *States of Separation*. For similar accounts elsewhere see Vigneswaran Darshan, and Joel Quirk, ed., *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Klaus Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Peter Gatrell, "War, Population Displacement and State Formation in the Russian Borderlands, 1914–1924," in *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in the Former Russian Empire, 1918–1924*, ed. N. P. Baron and P. Gatrell (London: Anthem Books, 2004), 10–34.

<sup>85</sup> Seda Altuğ, "Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land, and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939)," (Unpublished diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 220; Altuğ, "Syrian-Armenian Memory and the Refugee Issue in Syria under the French Mandate, 1921–1946," *The Armenian Weekly*, July 5, 2012; Altuğ, "Making of Refugee-ness and Armenians in French Syria (1915–1939): Religion, Land, History," in *Armenians in Syria*, ed. Antranik Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018).

<sup>86</sup> Altuğ, "Sectarianism," 221.

<sup>87</sup> Altuğ, "Sectarianism," 214–215.

for this conclusion.<sup>88</sup> One also gets the impression with her analyses that the first Armenian settlers arrived in the Syrian Jazira only at the end of the 1920s, and that the Armenian settlements in Jazira were exclusively French colonial endeavors.

The discourse of the Syrian nationalists and the Syrian nationalist press was so prominent that White argued that “the modern state of Syria was formed around and against refugees.” According to White, “refugee flows brought the geographical borders of Syria into a much sharper definition, drew state authority into rural areas where it had hitherto been virtually absent, and stimulated its intensification in the cities: state practices of territorialization, from border checks to agricultural engineering, were stimulated by and applied to refugee flows.”<sup>89</sup> In making this argument, White has drawn on previous scholarly work done on Eastern Europe that has demonstrated how the new social and political order, including self-definition and border delimitation, was constructed amid massive population displacements, as well as shifting territorial borders and cultural boundaries.<sup>90</sup> For White, the Syrianization of Jazira along with the demarcation of the Syrian-Turkish border<sup>91</sup> was largely a response to the settlement of the Anatolian Christian and Kurdish refugees there, which allowed Syrian nationalists to imagine that territory as a Syrian homeland.<sup>92</sup> He documented this claim based on numerous articles in the leading nationalist periodicals of Damascus, which had complained against the alleged Armenian “national home.” White’s and Altuğ’s accounts are well-documented assumptions, which, however, fail to capture the refugee perspectives on these settlement schemes or their responses to the Syrian nationalists’ accusations.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Altuğ acknowledged the lack of integrated and relational history of the controversial encounters between the incoming refugees and the local population during the early days of the French mandate Syria, *ibid*, 165.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-1939,” *Past and Present*, N:235 (2017), 141-178, 143; B. White, *The Emergence*, 111, 110-112.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron, “Population Displacement, State-Building and Social Identity in the Lands of the Former Russian Empire, 1917-1923,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, new ser., iv, 1 (2003); Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron, ed., *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945-50* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Richard Bessel and Claudia B. Haake, ed., *Removing People: Forced Removal in the Modern World* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak, ed., *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001). This is not an exhaustive list.

<sup>91</sup> On the demarcation of the Syrian-Turkish border, see S. Altuğ and B.T. White, “Frontières et pouvoir d’état: la frontière Turco-Syrienne dans les années 1920 et 1930,” *Vingtième-Siècle*, N :103 (2009), 91-104 ; Jean-David Mizrahi, “Un ‘nationalisme de la frontière’ : Bandes armées et sociabilités politiques sur la frontière turco-syrienne au début des années 1920,” *Vingtième-Siècle, Revue d’Histoire*, vol. 78 :2 (2003), 19-34.

<sup>92</sup> White, “Refugees,” 153, 156. During the Ottoman period, Syrian Jazira was divided between the vilayets of Mosul, Diyarbekir and sanjak of Deir ez-Zor.

<sup>93</sup> Another detailed account on the Syrian Jazira which has utilized the Syrian state archives, but did not give a voice to the refugees. Muhammad Jamāl Bārūt, *Al-Takawwun al-tārikhī al-hadīth lil-Jazīrah al-Sūrīya: as’ilah wa-ishkālīyāt al-tahawwul min al-Badwaniya ’ilā al-’umrān al-hadarī* [Contemporary History of the Syrian Jazira: Challenges of Urban Transition for Nomadic Communities] (Beirut: al-Markaz al-‘Arabī, 2013).

In most histories, with some notable exceptions, the Armenian refugees appear on the margins, often reduced to mere historical outcomes or victims with no agency, and usually portrayed as a homogenous group – the Armenians. Not only is the diversity of the community not considered, but often their perspectives are ignored due to a lack of scholarly engagement and critical interrogation of the materials produced by the refugees. These works, therefore, fail to capture and discuss the refugees’ voices. Such omissions have been addressed by recent research by Vahé Tachjian and Joel Veldkamp, who analyzed the Armenian press during the period under scrutiny. Tachjian’s valuable accounts range from the recovery of the abducted women, Armenian abandoned properties, and criticism of the Armenian use of Turkish, to narrating the lives of the genocide deportees.<sup>94</sup> Veldkamp’s work, on the other hand, examines the formation of the Syrian nation-state through the lens of the Aleppo Christians and the contested process through which they were incorporated into that nation-state. In this research, the Armenian refugees of Aleppo, one of the largest Christian communities, play a central role. Veldkamp’s insightful account focuses on the major political events in Aleppo during the mandate period, including elections and the autonomist movement, by using a new corpus of literature, including that produced by the refugees.<sup>95</sup> This dissertation follows this trend by not only capturing the refugee voices in relation to the three key events earmarked earlier and their impact on the state formation process in Syria but also in Soviet Armenia.<sup>96</sup> In doing so, it aims to show the interconnectedness of certain events and thus goes beyond the nation-state analytic categories in which usually refugee histories are embedded.<sup>97</sup> As such, it is informed by transnational and global histories as well as entangled histories (*histoire croisée*).<sup>98</sup> This enables us to consider multiple actors, including non-state actors, “without losing sight of specific historical contexts.”<sup>99</sup> As such, this dissertation intends to bridge the Syrian and Armenian

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<sup>94</sup> Vahé Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide,” *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 15:1 (2009), 60–80; “An Attempt to Recover Armenian Properties in Turkey through the French Authorities in Syria and Lebanon in the 1920s,” *International Criminal Law Review*, vol. 14:2 (2014), 343–357; “L’usage du turc et le renouveau identitaire chez les Arméniens du Liban et de Syrie dans les années 1920–1930,” in *Les Arméniens du Liban: Cent ans de présence*, ed. Christine Babikian Assaf, et al. (Beirut: Presses de l’Université Saint-Joseph, 2017), 59–83; *Daily Life in the Abyss: Genocide Diaries, 1915–1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

<sup>95</sup> Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s Christians and the Formation of the Syrian Nation-State, 1920–1936” (Unpublished diss., Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2021).

<sup>96</sup> See also Victoria Abrahamyan, “Citizen Strangers: Identity Labelling and Discourse in French Mandatory Syria, 1920–1932,” *Journal of Migration History*, vol. 6:1 (2020), 40–61.

<sup>97</sup> Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “Towards Connected Histories.”

<sup>98</sup> “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 111 (2006), 1441–1464; M. Werner and B. Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory*, vol. 45 (2006), 30–50; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, “Discussion; Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>99</sup> Jansen and Lässig, *Refugee Crises*, 9–10.

historiographies that tend to remain apart. It does so by analyzing the actions of the transnational Armenian political parties and the Armenian humanitarian networks in the events discussed in this dissertation. In addition, it examines the interaction between Soviet and French power in the Syrian space.

Most studies by Armenian authors on the Armenian communities in Syria (and beyond) treat them as a diasporic community and a trans-nation, usually narrating their cultural life, as well as ties with the “homeland” and their successful integration in the host societies.<sup>100</sup> The Armenian and Arabic language accounts of the Armenian community in Syria are heavily concentrated on the Genocide and the collection of eyewitness accounts,<sup>101</sup> as well as the rescues of women and children.<sup>102</sup> The works of the Armenian historians from Syria, on the other hand, are mainly concentrated on describing the national life in different locations, and different national institutions.<sup>103</sup> Arab hospitality toward the Armenians and the inter-

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<sup>100</sup> Simon Payaslian, “Diasporan Subalternities: The Armenian Community in Syria,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 16:1/2 (2007), 103-104; On Lebanon, see Vahe Sahakyan, “Spaces of Difference, Spaces of Belonging: Negotiating Armenianness in Lebanon and France” in *An Armenian Mediterranean: Words and Worlds in Motion*, ed. Kathryn Babayan, Michael Pifer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); V. Sahakyan, “Between Host-Countries and Homeland: Institutions, Politics and Identities in the Post-Genocide Armenian Diaspora (1920s-1980s),” (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2015); Tsolin Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora: Making Lebanon Their Own* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Bedross Der Matossian, “The Armenians of Jerusalem in the Modern Period: The Rise and Decline of a Community,” in *Routledge Handbook on Jerusalem*, ed. Bedross Der Matossian, Sulaiman Mourad, and Naomi Koltun-Fromm (New York: Routledge, 2018), 396-407. Artur Mkrtichyan, ed., *Armenians around the World: Migration and Transnationality* (Bern, NY: Peter Lang, 2015). This is not an exhaustive list.

<sup>101</sup> Verjine Svazelyan, “Hayots Tseghaspanutyoun. Akanates Veraprogneri V kayutyunner [Armenian Genocide, Testimonies of Eyewitness Survivors], *Patmabanasirakan Hands* (Yerevan, 2014); Nora Arissian, *Asda' al-Ibada al-Armaniyya fi al-Sahafa al-Suriyya 1877-1930* [The Echoes of the Armenian Genocide in the Syrian Press 1877-1930] (Beirut: Zakira Press, 2004); N. Arissian, *Ghwai'l al-Arman fi al-fiqra al-Suriy* [The Armenian Atrocities in the Syrian Mind] (Beirut 2002); Arissian, *Deir Zor, Martorosats kaghak* [Deir Zor: The City of the Martyrdom] (Aleppo, 2010); Fa'iz al-Ghussain, *Martyred Armenia* (translated from Arabic, London, 1917); V. Tachjian, *Daily Life*; Khatchig Mouradian, *Resistance Networks*; Mihran Minassian, “Ras al-Ayni katoratsnere, 1915-1916” [The Massacres of Ras al-Ayn] *Gandzasar*, April 24, 2017, 4-7; Minassian, “Halepi Azgayin Arajnordarani Gortsuneutyune Hayots Tseghaspanutyun tarinerim 1915-1918” [The Activities of the Aleppo Prelacy during the Armenian Genocide] in Hayeri Perkutyun gortse Merdzavor Arevelkum 1915-1923, *Handes Tseghaspanutyun* (Yerevan, 2020), 226-258; see also Minassian's other works which are too extensive to cite.

<sup>102</sup> Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*; Watenpaugh, “The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920-1927,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 115:5 (2010), 1315-1339; Vahram L. Shemmassian, “The League of Nations and the Reclamation of Armenian Genocide Survivors” in *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 81-112; Vahé Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism”; Lerna Ekmekcioglu, “A Climate for Abduction, A Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion During and After the Armenian Genocide,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 55 (2013), 522-553; Victoria Rowe, “Armenian Women Refugees at the End of Empire: Strategies of Survival,” in *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Panikos Panayi, and Pippa Virdee (London: Palgrave, 2011), 152-74; This is not an exhaustive list.

<sup>103</sup> Hakob Cholakian, *Suriyahay Deprotsi Patmutyun*, 2 vols. (Yerevan, 2021); Cholakian, *Kessap*, 3 vols. (Aleppo 1995); Fishenkjian, *Hushamatyan Suriyahay Ognutyun Khachi, 1919-2009* (Aleppo, 2010); Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki Patmutyune, 1946-1970* [The History of the Armenian Community in Syria, 1946-1970] (Yerevan, 2018), Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki Patmutyune, 1946-1970* [The History of the Armenian Community of Syria, 1946-1970] (Yerevan, 2018); Fishenkjian, “Suriyahay Jaziren ev Noragaght Hayere (Tel Prag),” *Edjmiatsin*, N: 4 (2020), 92-116; Fishenkjian, “Jarablus, 1920-1950” in *Banber Hayastani Arkhivneri*, N:2 (2005), 233-239:



community relations is another frequent theme. The Communist-era Armenian literature differs as it tends to paint Arab-Armenian relations as cordial relations between two brotherly peoples who suffered together under the Turkish yoke and later under colonial rule.<sup>104</sup> Such perceptions are not limited to Communist works only but are common among Armenian historians, in general.<sup>105</sup> Usually, it is claimed that Armenians were never foreign to Syria and that they were quick in learning the local language and customs. Arabs never regarded them as competitors and granted them citizenship and other privileges.<sup>106</sup>

Communist-era works studied Armenian communities abroad in the context of so-called repatriations. In these histories, the dominant narrative presents Soviet Armenia as the uncontested “homeland” that embraced the Armenian refugees spread all over the world, *unconditionally* welcoming them *home*. The imperialist allies, on the contrary, refused to deliver the “Armenian home,” despite their propagated “humanity.”<sup>107</sup> It is not only the communist-era works that treat the “repatriations” uncritically but also some recent studies.<sup>108</sup>

In sharp contrast to most Western historiographic claims, many Armenian language accounts present Armenian-Syrian relations as cordial, where personal meetings and regular exchange were the norms. As for the violent outbursts, these accounts claim that after each

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Fishenkjian, “Veratsnats Hayutyune Deir Zor-I mej: Patmakan Aknark,” *Haghordumner*, N: 4 (2019), 122-134. See also the special volume, Antranig Dakessian, ed. *Surio Hayere, Gitajoghovi Nyuter* [Armenians of Syria, proceedings of the conference (24-27 May 2015)] (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018). Araks Pashayan, Lilit Harutyunyan, *The Armenian Community of Syria: Actual Issues* (Yerevan: Lusakn, 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Hovhannes Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani Haykakan Gaghtojakhneri Patmutyun (1841-1946)* [History of Armenian Communities in Syria and Lebanon (1841-1946)] (Yerevan 1986), Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune Siriayi ev Libanani Azgayin-Azatagrakan Sharjumnerin* [The Participation of the Armenians in the National Liberation Movement in Syria and Lebanon], (Yerevan, 1968); N.H. Hovhannisyan and H.S. Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun Hamar Mghvats Paykarum* [Syria in the Struggle for Independence] (Yerevan, 1974); Narine Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun Hetevanqov Siriayum Hastatvats Hay Taragirneri Kargavijake ev Hay-Arabakan Pokhharaberutyunnere (1915-1924)* [The Status of the Armenian Deportees Settled in Syria as a result of the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian-Arab Relations (1915-1924)] (Yerevan, 2013).

<sup>105</sup> For a critical review see V. Cheterian, “How do you say “genocide” in Arabic?” *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 2, 2018.

<sup>106</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits Patmutyun*.

<sup>107</sup> Hovik Meliksetyan, *Arevmtahayutan Bernagaghte ev Spyurkahayeri Hayenadardutyune Sovetakan Hayastan 1915-1940*, [The Dispossession of the Western Armenians and their Repatriation to Soviet Armenia, 1915-1940], (Yerevan 1975); Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk Arenchutyunnere ev Hayrenadardutyune*, [Homeland-Diaspora Relations and Repatriations] (Yerevan, 1985). Karlen Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki Patmutyun* [History of Armenian Diaspora] (Yerevan, 2004); Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miuytan Nakhagah G. Gulbenkiani Hrajarakani Hartsis Shurj* [On the Resignation of the AGBU Head G. Gulbenkian] (Yerevan, 1996).

<sup>108</sup> M. Martirosyan, G. Avagyan, “Pastaghter Hay Gaghtakanneri Endunman ev Teghavorman Veraberyal, 1925-1931” [Documents in the Reception and the Settlement of the Armenian Refugees, 1925-1931], *Banber Hayastani Arkhivneri*, N:1 (2010), 103-120. Lilit Markaryan, *Hayastani Ognutyun Komitei Gortsuneutyune, 1921-1937* [The Activities of the Armenian Support Committee] (Yerevan, 2018); A. Eghiazaryan, M. Ananyan, et al., *Hay Gaghtakanutyune ev Hayrenik-Spyurk Kapere, 1918 Tvakanitc Mincev Mer Orere* [Armenian colonies and Homeland-Diaspora Relations, from 1918 to Ppresent] (Yerevan, 2017), Norik Sargsyan, *Spyurkahayeri 1946-1948 Mets Hayenadardzutyune* [The Great Repatriation of the Diaspora Armenians, 1946-1948] (Yerevan, 2014).

incident, efforts to prevent any similar “misunderstandings” were redoubled.<sup>109</sup> While most Armenian language sources attempt to present multilayered cooperation between the Syrians and the Armenians, they tend to paint a one-sided and positive picture of Armenian-Syrian relations. For example, they fail to mention the everyday tensions that were also common and, more importantly, any violence against the Armenians that did not fit neatly into their narratives. This silence helped avoid endangering the communities by undoing the level of balance and the friendship that had been achieved.

This dissertation proposes a revision regarding both narratives/historiographies– the generic Western historiography and the idealized Armenian one. It is important to understand the everyday dynamic and tensions between the two communities, including the violent outbursts parallel to the most cordial relations between their leaders, to understand better the crucial episodes that shaped relations between these two communities throughout most of the interwar years. In this dissertation, therefore, I aim to give a nuanced account of these relations showcasing the diversity and the complexities of the historical developments by comparing multiple sources to the greatest extent possible.

### **The main thesis and contribution of this dissertation**

The present dissertation aims to fill the gap in the existing literature on the Armenian refugees in Syria by integrating the Armenian language sources and connecting the multiple actors that interacted in mandate Syria. The purpose is to analyze in depth three major events that served as turning points and shaped the construction of the post-genocide Armenian community in Syria. These events are the acquisition of citizenship and voting rights, the Syrian Revolt, and the Jazira settlement scheme. In all three instances, I analyze the discourses and activities of the refugee elites and some of the institutions and aim to reveal the local, national, regional, and international dimensions that played a significant role in the (re)construction of the Armenian survivor communities in the interwar Levant, in general, and in Syria, in particular. By doing so, I seek to showcase the continuities with the past (the preservation of the *millet* system, for example), the inter-connectivity of events in Syria and Soviet Armenia (link between the Armenian “home” in Syria and the Soviet repatriations), and also the transnational aspects (the multiple loyalties of the refugees, or the activities of the Armenian networks).

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<sup>109</sup> Narine Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 82; E. Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan Pokharaberutyunnere Siriayum, 1918 Hoktember -1919 Hunis” [Armenian-Arab Relations in Syria, October 1918 - June 1919] in *Merdzavor ev Mijin Arevelki Erkrner ev Joghovatsuner* (Yerevan: Science Academy, 1974), vol. 6, 128-169.

None of the key events forming the backbone of this dissertation have been studied in depth in Armenian, Arab, or Western historiography. All three historiographies have fundamentally different interpretations of these events. For example, most Armenian accounts (Communist and others) treat citizenship as a simple act of legalizing the status of the refugees; Armenians were entitled to citizenship as former Ottoman subjects of Aleppo vilayet.<sup>110</sup> The Western historiography, on the contrary, looks at this episode in the context of French-biased policies toward the Armenian refugees. The Syrian Revolt and the Jazira settlement scheme follow the same discursive trajectory.

Usually, Communist-era Armenian works claim that Armenian-Arab friendship in Syria was forged during the Arab national liberation struggle in which Armenians fought side by side with the Arabs.<sup>111</sup> Such historiography is directly opposed to the Western mainstream accounts that present Armenian refugees as French allies in the difficult French takeover of Syria, the partition of the country, the popular opposition to French rule, the widespread mobilization and nationalism on the one hand, and the profile of the incoming Armenian refugees who were non-Muslim, non-Arab speaking, on the other.<sup>112</sup> Usually, this alliance is depicted as follows: “In this context of heightened political tensions, Arab nationalists perceived the mere presence of the Armenian refugees as an obstacle to the construction of the Syrian nation. This is why these refugees – being Christian, non-Arab, and non-Arabic speaking – were increasingly viewed as a sectarian, political, and economic threat.”<sup>113</sup> “Armenian refugees were valuable assets for the French authorities to serve as a loyal client population.”<sup>114</sup> “The “protection” of the refugees served to justify French rule while granting them citizenship (1924) and voting rights (1925) strengthened French control over Syrian politics,” “the arrival and settlement of the refugees” were “directly linked to colonial ‘divide and rule’ politics.”<sup>115</sup> In the same vein, Syrian-Armenian relations were claimed to be static. In this discourse, Muslim-Syrian attitudes toward Christian-Armenians were always hostile because the refugees were associated with the unwanted French rule.

It is striking how most Western historiography on the Armenian-Syrian and Armenian-French relations is based on sectarian and simplified assumptions. In making their claims, most authors base their conclusions on several violent episodes. The three most notorious of these

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<sup>110</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits Patmutyun*.

<sup>111</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune*; Hovhannisyan and Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun*.

<sup>112</sup> Longrig, *Syria*; Khoury, *Syria*; Altuğ, “Sectarianism;” the works of Watenpaugh; Robson, *States*.

<sup>113</sup> Watenpaugh, *Bred from Stones*, 176; Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 211-308; Watenpaugh, “Towards a New, 597-622, 602.

<sup>114</sup> Lust-Okar, “Failure of Collaboration,” 53-54.

<sup>115</sup> Seda Altuğ, “Syrian Armenian Memory.”

were the so-called Beirut (November 1918), Aleppo (February 1919), and Damascus incidents (October 1925).<sup>116</sup> All of them were violent clashes between the incoming Armenian refugees and the locals, usually Muslims. Except for the Aleppo incident, none of them has been studied thoroughly as individual events.<sup>117</sup> In Western historiography, each incident is dismissed in just one line. The first (Beirut) is recorded as “the first severe Armenian-Muslim fighting.”<sup>118</sup> The second event (Aleppo) is described as “the first clashes between the Sharifian army and the Christians,”<sup>119</sup> and, about Damascus, it has been said that participation of the armed Armenian volunteers resulted in the collective punishment of the Armenians. It seems that all of the accounts, even the most recent ones,<sup>120</sup> rely on Longrigg’s writings, in which none of the episodes are treated in detail. Moreover, Longrigg’s biased view is clearly perceptible; the adjective “disliked” is applied to the Armenians systematically throughout his text.<sup>121</sup>

In the case of the Jazira settlement, parts of the story appear in both Syrian and Armenian historiography, albeit as unconnected and isolated events. Moreover, in all three episodes, nuance is necessary. By combining Western, Armenian, and Arab historiographies, I shall provide the comprehensive and multifaced aspects of these episodes. In doing so, I aim to reveal the interconnectedness of the actors and the events, especially in the Caucasus and the Middle East, and the tensions between Syria and Soviet Armenia. The different alliances tell not only the story of the internal power struggle for leadership in the refugee community but much more; they reveal the intense competition between powerful external players over the refugees.

At the intersection of these connected stories, I put forward the central thesis of this dissertation. Above all, this work demonstrates the heterogeneity of the Armenian refugees in Syria. At the beginning of the 1920s, the Armenian community was roughly divided into two competing blocs, each with its own international supporters. The Ramkavars, Henchaks, and Communists usually allied with Soviet Armenia and other pro-Soviet forces, while the ARF allied with the pro-Western elements. In this struggle, which was also ideological, the most violent clashes in the history of the community took place. In this confrontation that seemed to be primarily an internal power struggle, each side tried to expose and discredit the other as strongly as possible. The press was one of the most effective tools in these vitriolic campaigns. Yet, the political blocs did not limit themselves to the Armenian language press to achieve their

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<sup>116</sup> On both Beirut and Aleppo incidents see Part I, for the Damascus incident see Part III of this dissertation.

<sup>117</sup> This incident is central to Veldkamp’s dissertation, J. Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s.”

<sup>118</sup> Longrigg, *Syria*, 80; P. du Vêou, *La Passion de Cilicie 1919-1920* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, 1954), 67-68.

<sup>119</sup> Gontaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 53-54, 122.

<sup>120</sup> Laura Robson, *The Politics of Mass Violence in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford: University Press, 2020), 73.

<sup>121</sup> Longrigg mentions in several occasions, that “The Christians of Syria differed little from the Muslims except the clearly foreign Armenians...”. Longrigg, *Syria*, 10-11, 159.

objectives; instead, they all published or encouraged the spread of rumors that were then widely circulated, especially in the local Arabic language press.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that it was due to this internal struggle that Armenian refugees became so strongly politicized that their numerical and political weight was constantly exaggerated in the Syrian nationalist press and later in the Western accounts. In that regard, I argue that a substantial part of the anti-Armenian discourse, along with the politicization of the Armenians in Syria, was a direct result of the confrontation between the two rival Armenian blocs rather than the hostile Syrian nationalist attitude, which existing scholarship has held responsible up to now. In at least two instances, the main sources sparking major anti-Armenian campaigns in Syria were news stories fabricated by the Soviet authorities in Moscow and Yerevan to fight against their political opponents – the ARF. This was the case with the claim of “the Armenian armed units” who fought against the Syrians during the Syrian Revolt and the “Armenian home” in the Syrian-Turkish borderlands. During the Syrian Revolt, the Soviet authorities saw an opportunity to invite the Armenian refugees to participate actively in the “national revolution” of Syria to liberate the Syrians from the yoke of the French imperialists, making the polarization of the community near complete. This was the first time Soviet-fabricated rumors were used by the wider Syrian circles as well as the mainstream historiography to present Armenian refugees as French allies. In addition, the French mandatory authorities tended to circulate rumors and deny them (or not) later.

This dissertation attempts to go beyond the binary dichotomy positioning Armenian refugees only between the Syrian nationalists of Damascus and the French mandatory power in Beirut and Paris. Historians have, by and large, studied the Arab political movement during the French mandate by observing the activities and discourses of the Damascene elites. However, Syrian nationalists were not the only players in the Syrian political landscape, nor were the Syrian hosts and the French mandatory powers the only relevant actors in the lives of the refugees. The Alepine notables often did not share the assumptions and views of the Syrian nationalists of Damascus regarding the refugees. Cordial cooperation between the local authorities (the governor of Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor, the tribes, and the heads of the villages) and the refugee leaders was usually the case there. This dissertation documents several such instances, such as the demand of the Alepine notables that citizenship should be extended to the Armenians and the establishment of refugee settlements in northern Syria.

This manuscript also demonstrates the importance of this story’s transnational aspect, locating the Armenian refugees’ agency while showing how they negotiated their place and status in Syria. It does so by positioning the refugees relative to all key players: French and

Syrian counterparts, Soviet Armenia, the USSR, Kemalist Turkey, and the Armenian diasporic humanitarian networks represented by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) and the Armenian Central Refugee Committee. As a matter of fact, the AGBU (co)financed most of the settlement schemes in Syria, while the Central Refugee Committee was active in Paris and Geneva, negotiating on behalf of the Armenian refugees with the French authorities and the LoN.

In this regard, I argue that it is not possible to locate the agency of the refugees nor capture the essence of the anti-Armenian discourse of the Syrian nationalists without integrating Soviet Armenia (as well as the USSR), Turkey, the inter-Armenian power struggle and dynamics in addition to the French mandatory and the Syrian nationalist policies vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees. In this case, the inter-Armenian struggle (and/or cooperation) was more important than their interactions with the French mandatory power, for example. In fact, this dissertation shows that the rise and fall of the Armenian settlements in the Syrian Jazira were due more to the Armenian agency than to favorable French policies.

I further argue that French refugee settlement schemes in the Syrian Jazira were intimately connected with the repatriations initiated by the Soviet authorities. During the 1920s and well into the 1930s, French-mandated Syria and Soviet Armenia were in indirect competition, claiming that the Ottoman Armenian refugees should settle on their lands for the same reasons. Both countries wanted to use their human resources, reconstruct and boost the economy of their respective regions, and enhance their reputation as humanitarian and refugee-hosting states, doing so primarily with the help of international and foreign financial support. In both countries, refugee labor and knowledge were utilized to produce chiefly one commodity – cotton. This competition became more acute when the funds collected by the LoN for the Yerevan irrigation scheme in Soviet Armenia were given instead to the French mandatory authorities to settle Armenian refugees in the Syrian Jazira. Moreover, practical efforts were also made to transfer more Armenian refugees to Syria instead of Soviet Armenia. This created legitimacy crises among the Soviet authorities in Armenia, which did everything possible to position itself as the only legitimate *homeland* for *all* the Armenians. Since major Armenian gatherings on the Syrian-Turkish borderlands were not desired by Moscow either, Soviet Armenia seized the favorable opportunities by initiating repatriations, which aimed to render such settlements in Jazira futile. I argue that Soviet Armenia became the only Armenian homeland – the center, only after Jazira was emptied of its Armenian populations.

By integrating multiple players in our narrative and showing the transnational character of the events, this dissertation demonstrates that all the relevant actors with their diverse and

multi-layered alliances must be considered to comprehend the full picture. A set of questions have guided this research: a) To what extent were the Armenian refugees tools at the hands of French mandatory authorities, as often depicted by the Syrian nationalist press and certain scholars? Were the Armenian refugees just passive executors of the French policies, or were they also drivers of certain policies through their discourses, actions, or alliances? Were the French mandatory authorities their only “masters”? b) What meaning was attached to the notions of “home” and “homeland” articulated by the Armenian refugees in Syria? c) Were any alternatives to Syrian political nationalism suggested by these refugees, and to what extent were these ideas implemented? What roles did the various clergy and political party leaders play? Finally, what impact did the Armenian agency have on the construction of the newly established Syrian state?

By answering these questions, this dissertation reveals the heterogeneity of the Armenian refugee community, the multiplicity of competing projects, the diversity of actions and strategies within the refugee community toward the French mandatory authorities, the Syrian hosts, and Soviet Armenia, as well as the impact of the refugees on state formation processes in Syria.

The other major contribution of this work is that it combines Syrian and Armenian historiographies while discussing state formation processes in both Syria and Soviet Armenia. In doing so, it goes beyond the genocide, eyewitnesses, or descriptive accounts. By putting the Armenian refugees to the fore, this dissertation also contributes to a non-statist approach to the state formation processes in the interwar period, demonstrating the ability of non-state actors – refugees – to construct multiple boundaries: identity, community, and state.

## **Methodology**

This research was carried out through an intertextual analysis of the discourse of the main actors to determine their alliances and strategies. Contextualization of the discourse shows the space in which it was embedded, its limits, and how different discourses nourished each other and evolved or intensified over time because of changing circumstances. Any analysis of discourse cannot be fully understood without careful consideration of the evolving historical context in which it is situated. Therefore, these discourses are studied in relation to three key historical moments: the acquisition of citizenship and voting rights, Armenian participation in the Syrian Revolt, and the Jazira settlement scheme.

Why is discourse central to this research? The power of discourse has been well established in the construction of societies. Bruce Lincoln, for one, has considered discourse along with (coercive) force as one of the most important tools of ideological persuasion in the hands of elites and other professionals. In doing so, he has considered discourse in all its forms (verbal, symbolic – spectacle, gesture, costume, edifice, icon, musical performance) to be able to win the consent of those over whom power is exercised, “transforming simple power into “legitimate” authority.”<sup>122</sup> Discourse, however, does not only serve the dominant or the elite group. The subordinate classes or subalterns also serve themselves with this powerful tool to “demystify, delegitimize and deconstruct the established norms, and institutions.”<sup>123</sup>

When confronted with the dangers (imaginary or real) presented by the refugees, Syrian nationalists in Damascus complained by utilizing their press organs. During the Syrian Revolt, one of the Armenian refugees’ camps in Damascus was attacked due to rumors. In the same vein, the creation of the alleged “Armenian home” was spread, confirmed, and contested in the discourse of the Syrian nationalists based on fake news and press campaigns. The role of rumor and its power to consolidate state power or serve the subaltern groups has been established.<sup>124</sup> This dissertation documents two such cases, the Syrian Revolt and the “Armenian home” in the Syrian Jazira.

The way that different discourses informed but also nourished and therefore transformed each other is also documented in this dissertation. Discourse, a powerful tool in pursuing political goals, was employed not only by the French mandatory power, the Syrian nationalists, and the Soviet and Turkish authorities but also by the subaltern actors – the Armenian refugees. This is shown in the numerous written testimonies we traced in the newspapers, memoirs, yearbooks, and personal correspondence left behind by the Armenian refugee leaders. Yet, how are these works representative of the actual “lived experiences” of the non-elite refugee men and women in the camps? Here, we face a similar issue to that faced by the pioneers of subaltern studies, how to recover the “voices” of those who have left no diaries, led no political parties, and had no leading roles in the community?<sup>125</sup> Another challenge is the fact that male refugee

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<sup>122</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), 5; see also Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>123</sup> Lincoln, *Discourse*, 5.

<sup>124</sup> Jordi Tejel, “States of rumors”; see also Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, “Republic of Conspiracies”.

<sup>125</sup> For similar difficulties in the subaltern studies to recover the voices of the oppressed, see Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 99:5 (1994), 1475-1490; P. Chatterjee, *The Nation, and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ., 1993); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Trafficking in History and Theory: Subaltern Studies,” in *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities*, ed., K. K. Ruthven (Canberra, 1992); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). With



voices have been taken as the default in representing the refugees' "experience" even though women and children often feature in the materials about fundraising.<sup>126</sup> In the words of Banko, female refugees "were often put in their place not only by the authorities but also by their male counterparts, which is reflected in the archive."<sup>127</sup>

Experiences of displacement under the legal status of "refugee" risk decontextualizing and potentially even dehumanizing the refugees.<sup>128</sup> Refugees are often studied as the subjects of humanitarianism, with a focus on the narratives and policies of international organizations. It has been argued convincingly that "humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees."<sup>129</sup> In the same way, historian Peter Gatrell has pointed out through his seminal research "the absence of refugees from mainstream historiography" and has suggested a new approach to enable us to be "attentive to connections between the circumstances, actions, and trajectories of refugees through time and space."<sup>130</sup> This dissertation follows Professor Gatrell and aims to fill part of the lacuna by making the refugees the primary subject rather than the object of this study. It does so by utilizing the concept of "refugeedom" coined by Gatrell after a Russian term that emerged during WWI, recognizing refugees as a new social category. As such, it provided refugees with an opportunity to articulate their experiences, relief, and resettlement.<sup>131</sup> We follow Gatrell's argument that "states make refugees, but that refugees can also make states,"<sup>132</sup> in other words, refugee presence can have not only "disruptive" but also "recuperative" effects on the hosting states, becoming both a problem and a resource for statecraft.<sup>133</sup> Such a perception is opposed to earlier arguments that saw the formation of the nation-states as only a refugee-generating process.<sup>134</sup> By following this approach and applying the concept of

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reference to refugees, see E. Hadjisavvas, "Journey Through the 'Gate of Zion': British Policy, Jewish Refugees and The La Spezia Affair, 1946," *Social History*, vol. 44:4 (2019), 469–493; G. Pandey, "Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories," *Ethnos*, vol. 60:3–4, (1995), 223–242.

<sup>126</sup> Exceptions are, Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History," *Journal of Palestine Studies* vol. 27:2 (1998), 42–58; Katarzyna Nowak, "A Gloomy Carnival of Freedom. Sex, Gender, and Emotions among Polish Displaced Persons in the Aftermath of World War II," *Aspasia*, vol. 13:1 (2019), 113–134.

<sup>127</sup> Banko et al. "What is refugee history", 16; Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghosal, Katarzyna Nowak, and Alex Dowdall, "Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History," *Social History*, vol. 46:1, 70–95, 91.

<sup>128</sup> Sossie Kasbarian, "Refuge in the 'Homeland': The Syrians in Armenia" in *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the Present*, ed. Jo Laycock et al. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020), 166.

<sup>129</sup> Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 378.

<sup>130</sup> Peter Gatrell "Refugees - What's Wrong with History?," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 30:2 (2016), 170–189, Gatrell, *The Making of Modern Refugee*.

<sup>131</sup> Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*; Gatrell, "Refugees – What's". Gatrell et al. "Reckoning; L. Banko, et al. "What is refugee history".

<sup>132</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Making*, 175.

<sup>133</sup> Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacement of Statecraft* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>134</sup> Aristide Zolberg, "The Formation of New States as a Refugee-Generating Process," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 467 (1983), 282–296.

refugeedom, we aim to focus our attention on multiple, interrelated actors with a critical interrogation of the agency of the Armenian refugees in articulating their status, and negotiating their place in Syria.

Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which understood "speak" as not only being able to express oneself but also having a forum in which to be heard, concluded that they could not, for the elites in society always speak for them.<sup>135</sup> Subaltern scholars have advocated reading the historical records against the grain, seeking to uncover the silent but "pregnant" voices of the subalterns by revealing the myths, cults, ideologies, consciousness, rumors, religiosity, and bonds of community. These scholars have established that "subalterns and subalternity do not disappear into discourse but appear in the interstices, subordinated by structures over which pressure is exerted."<sup>136</sup> In other words, by exploring the fault lines of dominant discourses, subalterns can be retrieved by their actions, the impact of these actions, and their presence, offering different perspectives.<sup>137</sup>

The scholarship of "History from Below" has followed the steps of the scholars of the subaltern actors and post-colonial critics. It has done so by adopting critical interrogation of the nationalist historiography, which is recognized to be in the service of elite nationalism and being mindful of methodological nationalism. In interwar Syria, such works include Gelvin, Provence, Tejel, Öztan, to name but a few. In the field of refugee studies, Peter Gatrell and his research team have indicated ways of tracing refugee voices through the concept of polyphony, which treats every character "as ideologically authoritative and independent... the author of a fully-weighted ideological conception of his [sic] own."<sup>138</sup> Taken together, these scholars suggest considering the context when retrieving refugee voices in the archival record. Instead of taking evidence of the refugee experience for granted, consider it as sites of negotiation and contestation between the refugees and refugee regimes, officials, diaspora communities and

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<sup>135</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed., Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 67-111; See also Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Later, she revised her claim about the impossibility of the subaltern to speak. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 308.

<sup>136</sup> Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies" 1480, 1488, 1482.

<sup>137</sup> The influential work of Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and the chapter on "Can the Mosquito Speak?" is a perfect manifestation.

<sup>138</sup> This concept is adopted after Mikhail Bakhtin, who applied it to the works of Dostoevsky in which he underlined the dialogic nature of polyphony, namely that voices and human life are always in relation to each other. Gatrell, et al. "Reckoning, 90; see also Anthea Vogl, "The Genres and Politics of Refugee Testimony" *Law & Literature*, vol. 30:1 (2018), 81-104; N. Sigona, "The Politics of Refugee Voices: Representations, Narratives, and Memories" in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. E. Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long and N. Sigona (Oxford, 2014), 269-282.

networks, families, and friends, which could shape and reshape the social and cultural words of the refugees.<sup>139</sup>

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, in her turn, advocates “going beyond the focus on the actions, agency, and experiences of individuals affected by conflict, to examine diverse ways that different refugees and hosts themselves may conceptualize and represent the encounters that take place throughout displacement and hosting.”<sup>140</sup> Since this dissertation is not only concerned with the representation of the voices of the Armenian refugees but also that of the hosts regarding the key events discussed here, it, therefore, takes its cue from all of these studies.

## Sources

This dissertation draws on a diverse array of sources, including letters, reports, speeches, memoirs, newspaper articles, periodicals, yearbooks, as well as fiction, poems, photographs, and personal correspondence. These documents were written in six languages: Armenian (both Eastern and Western), Arabic, Russian, English, French, and German. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author. In addition, primary sources from the Armenian refugee community in Syria and Armenian political leaders based in Beirut, Cairo, Paris, New York, Boston, Yerevan, Tbilisi, and Moscow have been examined.

Press articles, in particular, have been of the utmost importance in capturing Syrian and Armenian daily life in the 1920s and 1930s. As Rashid Khalidi has rightly noted, the “daily press is a basic source for the modern political history, mirror of events and trends and sometimes their initiator.”<sup>141</sup> This is particularly true for the period in question, when the press, by far, was the main information source and an important platform where leading intellectuals, religious figures, and politicians from all communities expressed their views and engaged in discussions.

Mandatory Syria saw a high degree of political mobilization throughout the interwar period, during which most of its modern-style political parties were formed. The role of newspapers quickly gained importance in disseminating party ideologies and informing public opinion. In addition, the interwar period saw an unprecedented flourishing of the press, with 92 press titles

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<sup>139</sup> Peter Gatrell et al. “Reckoning,” 89.

<sup>140</sup> E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Disrupting Humanitarian Narratives,” <https://refugeehosts.org>, undated (accessed on July 14, 2022).

<sup>141</sup> Rashid Khalidi, “The Press as a Source,” 22.

in Damascus and 31 in Aleppo.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, newspapers shaped a political space where negotiations and confrontations took place between the competing local elites.

Refugee issues occupied an important place in the newspapers. The discourse of the Syrian nationalists was manifested in their press organs *Al-Yawm*, *Al-Ayyâm*, *Alef-Ba'*, *Al-Sha'ab* and *Al-Qabas*.<sup>143</sup> Most refugees resided in Aleppo, and such discourse was not shared by many Alepines and their press organs, as will be shown throughout this dissertation. To be sure, there were also nationalist newspapers in Aleppo that had a critical attitude vis-à-vis the refugees, for example, *Missak*, *An-Nahda*, *Al-Suriya al-Shemaliya*.<sup>144</sup> Other periodicals were pro-refugee, among them *Al-Taqaddum*, the mouthpiece of the Greek Catholic community, *Le Courrier de Syrie*, a French-language paper of small circulation, *Dogru Yol*, a short-lived paper of the exiled Turkish community by the Kemalist regime.<sup>145</sup> As is evident, not all the periodicals supporting the Christian Armenian refugees had Christian editors or readership. *Dogru Yol*, for example, whose editors were not Christian, was pro-refugee, while *Alef Ba'* of Damascus, whose editor was Greek Orthodox, was famous for its anti-refugee rhetoric. *Al-Taqaddum's* editor Shukri Riskallah Kneider, a Christian Arab, was often considered Armenian because of his pro-Armenian articles.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Nadine Meouchy, "La presse de Syrie et du Liban entre les deux guerres (1918-1939)," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* vol. 95-98 (2002).

<sup>143</sup> *Al-Yawm* (or *Al-Ayyâm*) appeared in the early 1920s, I was unable to find details about this newspaper in the French mandatory records. *Fata al-Arab* was founded in 1918 in Damascus, it had 1500-1700 prints, its editor was Omar al-Tibi and the owners Maaruf al-Arnaute and Adel Sheikh al-Ard. *Alef-Ba'* was established in 1920, it had 1650- 2000 prints, its editor was Wadih Sudawi, and the owner Yusef el-Issa (Greek Orthodox). *Al-Sha'ab* was founded in 1927 in Damascus, its editors were Adib Safadi and Keki Afyumi, and the owners were Toufik Jana and Selim Sabagh. It had 1500 prints, it was the mouthpiece of antimandate forces. *Al-Qabas* was established in 1928 in Damascus, its editors were Munir al-Rayes and Sami al-Shama, and the owner Adel Kurd Ali and Nageb al-Rayis. It had 1500 prints, it became the official mouthpiece of the National Bloc. See in, CADN-SL 1588, L.T. Colonel Tracol, chef du S.R. des Etats de Syrie et du Djebel Druze à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. du Levant, *Le liste des journaux et periodique*, Damas, 6 fevrier 1929.

<sup>144</sup> *Missak* appeared in Aleppo, it had 800 prints, its director was Sharaf ed Din Faroukhi (Muslim). *An-Nahda* appeared in Aleppo, it had 500 prints, its director was Muhammad Soubhi Basmaji (Muslim). *Al-Suriya al-Shemaliya* was established in May 1926 in Aleppo, the director was Antoine Sharawi (Christian). See in, CADN-SL 1588, L.T. Colonel Tracol, chef du S.R. des Etats de Syrie et du Djebel Druze à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. du Levant, *Le liste des journaux et periodique*, Damas, 6 fevrier 1929.

<sup>145</sup> *Al-Taqaddum* had started its publication in Aleppo before the mandate, its editor was Shukry Kneider (Greek Orthodox), and appeared three times a week. It had 500 prints. *Le Courrier de Syrie* was created in 1927 in Aleppo by Fadel Asswad (Maronite) as the French version of Barid al-Suriyy which had appeared in 1919 in Arabic. It had between 300 and 500 prints, it was French language monthly that defended the rights of the small linguistic and ethnic communities. *Dogru Yol* was established in 1923 in Aleppo by Jelal Kadri, the former Mutasarif of Aintab (Muslim), it had 600 prints. It was biweekly in Turkish, and was widely read in Aleppo's Turkish-speaking cazas and the Armenians. See in, CADN-SL 1588, L.T. Colonel Tracol, chef du S.R. des Etats de Syrie et du Djebel Druze à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. du Levant, *Le liste des journaux et periodique*, Damas, 6 fevrier 1929. On the Syrian press see also, Miladhi, al-Tiba 'a wa al-sahafia fi Halab [Printing and Journalism in Aleppo] (Damascus: Dar y'arib lil-darasat wa al-tawzi, 1996); Nadine Meouchy, "La presse;" Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>146</sup> Narine Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 79.

In this dissertation, two dailies published in Damascus, *Al-Qabas* (1928–1958) and *Al-Sha‘b* (1927–1937), have been studied. *Al-Qabas*, whose editor was Najib al-Rayyis, was a nationalist paper close to the National Bloc until the end of the 1930s.<sup>147</sup> Many anti-Armenian articles appeared in these two newspapers. Other important nationalist press organs that we have been unable to consult but were regularly and consistently cited in the Armenian press included *Fata’ al-Arab*, *An-Nahda*, *Ray al-‘am*, *Al-Suriya al-Shemaliya* from Syria, and *Al-Ahrar*, *Al-Ahwal*, *Al-Ahd al-Jaded*, and *Al-Bayan* from Lebanon.<sup>148</sup> Among the Aleppo papers, we have been able to consult *Al-Taqaddum*,<sup>149</sup> as well as *L’Eclair du Nord*.<sup>150</sup>

I have also used the French-subsidized papers of Beirut and Damascus to demonstrate how these papers influenced and nourished the Syrian nationalist press. These were *L’Orient*, *La Syrie*, and *L’Echos de Damas*.<sup>151</sup> Turkish-language papers, especially *Milleyet*, *Hakimiyet Milliye*, and others, have been used as they are cited in the Armenian press. Many Armenian and Arabic press articles were written in response to these articles. These papers were close to the Kemalist government and, in many instances, tried to influence the Syrian nationalist press.

This research has required a particular focus on Armenian language sources. The intellectual life of the Armenian refugee community in Syria was as rich as that of their Syrian

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<sup>147</sup> Najib al-Rayyis, was a rather controversial figure who also participated in the Syrian Revolt as well as Palestinian riots. Sami Moubayad, *Steel and Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria, 1900-2000* (Seattle, WA: Cune Press, 2006), 498; Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914-1948* (Parlux, 2005); Najib al-Rayyis, *Yä dhaläm al-sijn 1920-1952, Al-a‘mä al-mukhtära* (London: Riad el-Rayyes, 1994).

<sup>148</sup> I have been unable to obtain copies of the Syrian newspapers that cover the early 1920s because of the impossibility to visit Syria and conduct research at the libraries and archival centers there due to ongoing conflict. According to the information available in the French mandate records, *Al-Ahrar* had a record high of 6000 prints, it was published in Beirut and its director was G. Tuëni (Christian). *Al-Ahwal* had 2000 prints, it was published in Beirut, its director was Simon Seif, while the owner was Khalil Badawi, who by 1923 was condemned twice for its anti-mandate publications. *Al-Bayan* was printed in Beirut with 200 prints. Its director was Butrus Bustani, it defended the independence of Lebanon. CADN-SL 1588, Renseignement sur la Federation, *La Presse damascaine et la Fédération*, Damas, 22 août 1923. Later, another paper *Lisaan al-Ahrar* also emerged in 1927 as a political weekly in Beirut. Its owner was Hashem Khankan. In the French records, this paper is labeled as “journal de chantage.” It has been impossible for us to trace any connections between the two *Ahrars* in the documents. See in, CADN-SL 1588, L.T. Colonel Tracol, chef du S.R. des Etats de Syrie et du Djebel Druze à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. du Levant, *Le liste des journaux et periodique*, Damas, 6 fevrier 1929.

<sup>149</sup> Alexander Keshishan, *Safahat watha’iqiyah min jaridat al-Taqaddum al-Halabiyah ‘an al-ahwal al-Arminiyyah wa-al-‘Arabiyah fi al-Dawlah al-‘Uthmaniyyah wa-al-bilad al-Shamiyyah* [Pages from the Alepine Newspaper *al-Taqaddum* about the Conditions of the Armenians and the Arabs in the Ottoman State and Syria], (Aleppo: al-Jam‘iyah al-Khayriyyah al-‘Umumiyah al-Arminiyyah, 1996).

<sup>150</sup> I am grateful to Jeol Veldkamp who generously shared his collections with me.

<sup>151</sup> *La Syrie* was established in 1919, it had 2250 print, its editor was George Vayssie. *L’Orient* was established in 1924, it had a 3700 print, its edotr was George Kabbaz. *L’Echos de Damas* was established in 1929, the owner was Georges Fares, it had 750 prints. See in, CADN-SL 1588, L.T. Colonel Tracol, chef du S.R. des Etats de Syrie et du Djebel Druze à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. du Levant, *Le liste des journaux et periodique*, Damas, 6 fevrier 1929.

counterparts. During the interwar period alone, the Armenian community produced 30 publications, mostly periodicals, religious and school papers, and newspapers.<sup>152</sup>

In addition, the Armenian refugee community of Syria left behind a rich corpus of material comprising political party newspapers, yearbooks, religious and school newsletters, personal correspondence, and memoirs. By analyzing these materials, I have been able to trace diverse actors and their voices (political parties, churches, and philanthropic organizations) as well as the strategies of the refugee leaders. Armenian historians have used this rich corpus of literature; however, it is much less often used in the English language works on the Armenian community of Syria. The works of Tachjian and Veldkamp are among the few exceptions. When choosing the newspapers, an effort has been made to keep a balance between the different political party organs. The following newspapers present the different Armenian voices:

<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Place of Pub.</b>
Ramkavar	<i>Hay Dzayn</i>	1918-1919	Aleppo
ARF	<i>Cilicia</i>	1919-1920	Adana
Henchak	<i>Suriakan Mamul</i>	1922–1927	Aleppo
Ramkavar	<i>Yeprat</i>	1927–1947	Aleppo
Ramkavar	<i>Arev</i>	1915–1944	Cairo
ARF	<i>(Nor) Pyunik</i>	1924–1926	Beirut
ARF	<i>Husaber</i>	1926–present	Cairo
ARF	<i>Hayreniq</i>	1922–1970	Boston
ARF	<i>Harach</i>	1925–2009	Paris
AGBU	<i>Miutyun</i>	1912–1961	Cairo/Paris/NY
Soviet	<i>Khorherd. Hayastan</i>	1921-1940	Yerevan
Soviet	<i>Hravirak</i>	1925-1926	Yerevan
Soviet	<i>Yerevan</i>	1925-1937	Paris
Soviet	<i>Zarya Vostoka</i>		Tbilisi
Neutral	<i>Lebanon</i>	1924–1935	Beirut
Neutral	<i>Hayastani Kochnak</i>	1921–1968	New York

<sup>152</sup> In Lebanon this figure was fifty-seven, see in N. Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia*, 69.

In the case of *Suriakan Mamul*, (*New*) *Pyunik*, and *Yeprat*, the entire collections have been thoroughly studied.<sup>153</sup> The early twenties, the formative years of the Armenian refugee community in Syria and Lebanon, were eventful and important. However, until now, the available information has been from secondary sources. The latter, in its turn, is not always complete or objective.

While working with the press, it is important to understand whether these newspapers were individual initiatives, personal enterprises tightly connected to certain “intellectuals” or truly representative of certain circles. Jean-Francois Sirinelli’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s approach to the media has guided this research. According to the former, the press, in addition to personal relations, creates a public by inclusion (friendship, loyal readers) and exclusion (discourses, debates, political position) and is a microcosm for intellectual activity, where the exchange of ideas and services takes place.<sup>154</sup> According to Bourdieu, the press should be considered a chain of intellectual socializing centers among many others – publishing houses, cafes, bookstores, and cultural associations. Therefore, if the intellectual notion of the press is taken into consideration, then it is possible to go beyond the inter-textual analyses and observe the polemic, personal, or collective identities and boundaries. In this sense, the press becomes a collective project, where it is possible to identify its audience, its political position (by considering the opinions of the editors), power relations, political membership, economic and financial interests, and source of financing.<sup>155</sup>

The calls for caution by historian White about the audience are also considered. He has rightly pointed out that most studies using the press as the main source have concentrated on the production (what journalists wrote) and not on the reception (the audience). While nationalist journalists claimed to represent the views of the Syrians, in reality, most of their readership was concentrated in larger cities, where the nationalist feeling was strongest.<sup>156</sup> This

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<sup>153</sup> These papers had limited print copies. *Suriakan Mamul*, for example, appeared initially just once a week during the first year of the publication, gradually becoming three times a week. Its owner was Hayk Toroian, while the director was Tigran Yeretsian. It had only 100 prints. (*Nor*) *Pyunik*, was a biweekly, and the owner and the chief editor was Khostrov Tutunjian, its number of prints is not known. In the French records, details are provided only for *Yeprat* a biweekly published in Aleppo. The Director was Dr. Khatchik Poghosian while the owner was Yeghizar Benlian. Although its publication date is wrongly mentioned as 1925 its first number was actually issued on 6 July 1927. It had initially 400 prints, however, within two years it was increased to 1000. Although these records mention that the paper made efforts to not interfere in local politics, it did mention that its chief editor, Sargis Gueterian who had a Cypriot passport was refused to prolong his stay and was compelled to leave Syria. CADN-SL 1588, Service des Renseignements, *La presse de Damas en Octobre 1930*, Ière Partie Damas, 24 octobre 1930.

<sup>154</sup> Jean-Francois Sirinelli, “Les intellectuels,” in René Rémond (dir.), *Pour une histoire politique* (Paris, 1988), 199-231.

<sup>155</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Choses dites* (Paris, 1987).

<sup>156</sup> White, *The Emergence of Minorities*, 8-9.

is, of course, true for the Armenian language press, too. While each paper tended to speak on behalf of the “nation,” it is important to remember that these periodicals published in Syria and Lebanon were mostly affiliated with political parties. Moreover, few of the Armenian refugees could speak and read Armenian.<sup>157</sup>

Drawing primarily on political sources such as political party mouthpieces and colonial records carries the risk of unintentionally reproducing the views and assumptions of these political actors. To avoid such an eventuality, an effort has been made to include additional sources written by non-political actors, such as religious monthlies, school newsletters, yearbooks, memories, and personal letters. These sources have been critically analyzed and compared with the secondary literature as much as possible.

Yearbooks, in particular, are an important primary source providing precious descriptions of the community, evaluating important events, and reflecting on the future. The following yearbooks have been consulted: *Amenun Taretsuyts*, *Suriahay Taretcuytc*, *Tatev*, *Suriakan Albom*, *Arevelk*, *Geghard*.<sup>158</sup> The rich corpus of information documented by the team of Houshamadyan has also been consulted.<sup>159</sup>

In addition, memories and personal letters written by prominent political figures from Syria, Lebanon, and Soviet Armenia – Vahan Papazian (ARF), Simon Vratsyan, Avetis Aharonyan, Mihran Damadian (Ramkavar), Mihran Najarian (Henchak), Artin Madoyan (Communist), Alexander Myansikyan (Communist), among others – have been analyzed.

French diplomatic archives, relevant American and British records, and the archives of the LoN and the Committee of the International Red Cross have been utilized, too. Others include the Archives of the Central Refugee Committee of Paris and the Armenian National Delegation, archives of AGBU (Paris and Cairo), archives of Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia (Lebanon), archives of the Armenian prelacy of Aleppo,<sup>160</sup> communist and state archives of Armenia, and the central archives of the ARF (Watertown, USA).<sup>161</sup> Many of the Armenian language sources are used for the first time.

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<sup>157</sup> In the Cilicia region of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were overwhelmingly Turkish speaking. In Syria, the vast majority of the survivors were from Cilicia.

<sup>158</sup> *Amenun Taretsuyts* (*The Everyone's Yearbook*, 1916-1924) edited by Teodik and printed in Aleppo in 2009; *Suriahay taretcuytc* (*The Syrian Yearbook*, 1924-1926), printed in Cario, *Tatev* (1925-1930), edited by Artavazd Surmeyan, printed in Aleppo; *Suriakan Albom* (Aleppo, 1927-1929) printed in Aleppo, *Arevelq* (Aleppo, 1946), *Geghard* (Aleppo, 1975, 1976-1978, 1985, 1991, 1996 and 2000), edited by Robert Jebejian.

<sup>159</sup> [www.Houshamadyan.org](http://www.Houshamadyan.org) is a project led by Dr. Vahé Tachjian that documents the memory of Ottoman Armenian communal life.

<sup>160</sup> I am grateful to Khatchig Mouradian, for sharing some of these files with me.

<sup>161</sup> Due to Covid-19 pandemic my trip to Watertown was postponed for two years, although I was able to visit and access the relevant files in November 2021, I have been unable to use its wealth in this dissertation. It will be done in my future research.



Among the secondary sources, Armenian, Russian, Arabic, English, German, and French books have been consulted.

## **Chapter outlook**

This dissertation is divided into Four Parts, in addition to the Introduction and the Epilogue.

Introduction provides the historical background, presents the literature review and the main thesis of this dissertation along with its main contribution, methodology and sources.

Part I comprises five chapters and covers the pre-mandate political situation in Syria, the arrival of the refugees, Syrian and Armenian participation in the Paris Peace Conference and the conflicting claims over Cilicia. It further relates the Cilicia settlement, its evacuation and its impact on the Armenian-French relations. Part I describes also French policies in Syria and vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees, in particular, as well as the increasing competition of the external powers for influence over the refugees.

Part II comprises three chapters and is devoted to the issues of belonging, citizenship, and voting rights. It describes the refugee community, its internal diversity, as well as the political organizations active among the refugees. It presents in detail the circumstances under which Armenian refugees were granted Syrian citizenship revealing unexpected insights as well as narrates the reactions of the refugees and their political leaders regarding this important event. Part II also relates participation of the Armenians in the local elections.

Part III is composed of five chapters and covers the issue of loyalty and the Armenian participation in the Syrian Revolt and its aftermath. It studies the interplay of the Revolt and the creation of the communist networks in Syria and Lebanon with the ultimate goal to reveal the Armenian participation in it. Part III also tells the story of the Turkish-backed international fact-finding mission to Syria in the context of the Revolt and its unexpected outcome laying the foundations for the future large-scale refugee settlement scheme in Syria.

Part IV has four chapters and together with the Epilogue describes the episode of the Armenian “national home” in northern Syria, from its inception to its destruction. It narrates the many layers of this “home” from local Syrian political situation to regional and global circumstances revealing how and why the discussions on the possible Armenian “national home” in the Syrian Jazira were born, as well as the interplay of such discussions with the repatriation efforts of Soviet Armenia.

Finally, the Epilogue relates the rise and the fall of the Armenian Jazira.

## **Part I: Syria becomes home for the Armenian refugees**

Part I attempts to show how and under which conditions Syria became home for the Armenian refugees. It starts by describing the Armenian-Syrian relations over a two-year period in the aftermath of WWI. It discusses briefly a contentious episode – the Armenian massacre of Aleppo, and its representation. In doing so, it aims to explain why certain events are recorded in the mainstream historiography in the way they are.

Second important theme treated in Part I is the Cilician episode, which was contentious in many ways. Cilicia, a strategically located region on the borders of modern-day Syria and Turkey, had become the object of conflicting claims in the aftermath of the First World War. All the Great Powers were interested in claiming the region, yet they could not do so openly because of conflicting pledges made previously. Notably, Cilicia was a homeland for most of the Armenian refugees who had survived the genocide and found themselves in Syria and beyond. Well aware of this situation, all the Great Powers tried using the Armenian refugees and their leaders to help achieve their own territorial claims. Meanwhile, the Armenian political leaders believed they were the rightful owners of Cilicia, especially in view of the concrete, albeit verbal, assurances given them by the Great Powers. Due to these conflicting claims, Armenian political leaders would soon realize that their main opponent in Cilicia was France. The Cilician episode is significant because it demonstrates how tense Armenian-French relations became and highlights the inaccuracy of much Western historiography depicting Armenians as French “allies.” Moreover, it challenges the claims that Armenians were the “natural” allies of the French and colonizing tools in their hands. Finally, it helps us understand why, throughout the mandate period, the French authorities were doubtful about the loyalty of the Armenians, especially their leaders, as we shall discover later in this dissertation.

Part I also discusses the mandate system and the French governance in Syria. It sheds light on the emerging ad-hoc policies vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees that would lay the ground for the later larger-scale refugee settlements. In the last Chapter, it explains why and how Armenian refugees became preferred targets for the LoN’s humanitarian interventions and how refugees became the pawns in the great game.

The aim of the chapters in Part I is to show that Armenian-French and Syrian-Armenian relations were multi-layered from the start. There was never a single mode of cooperation; instead, relationships constantly evolved, and alliances shifted quickly.

## Chapter I: Syrians and Armenians in the post-war Aleppo

This Chapter presents Syrian-Armenian relations in post-war Aleppo over a two-year period. It can be divided into two distinct stages: from the Armistice to February 1919 – the Aleppo massacres – and after the massacres until the immigration to Cilicia. The integration of the Aleppo massacre into our narrative aims to show how this little-studied episode served as a basis for wrong assumptions about Armenian-Syrian relations throughout the interwar years.

### Syrian – Armenian relations

In mid-November 1918, just two weeks after the arrival of the Allied forces, two new newspapers were launched in Aleppo, *Hay Dzayn* (Armenian Voice) and *Al-Arab* (The Arab). *Hay Dzayn* became the first regular Armenian language newspaper published in Syria. The newspaper editor was Mikayel Natanian, a Ramkavar-affiliated intellectual. Notably, the permission to publish *Hay Dzayn* was facilitated by no other than Shukri pasha Al-Ayubi, the new military governor of Aleppo.<sup>1</sup> Later, a second newspaper called *Daragir* emerged and was edited by Benjamin Melkonian.

As for *Al-Arab*, it was the organ of *Nadi al-Arab* (The Arab Club), formed in the autumn of 1918 with branches throughout Syria. While the Arab Club was originally modeled on the *Literary Society* active in Istanbul, 1909–1915, its Aleppo branch was opened in the former *Ittihad* club, which was renamed overnight.<sup>2</sup> The *Arab Club* quickly became an important social and cultural center for Alepines and Armenians alike. It was there that the first cultural event organized by the refugees was hosted and attended by Faysal.<sup>3</sup>

With Ahmed Sami al-Sarraj as its chief editor, *Al-Arab* proved to be an influential publication from the start. Both *Hay Dzayn* and *Al-Arab* promoted friendship and cooperation between two “future neighboring states.” Moreover, *Al-Arab* was regularly praised by the editors of *Hay Dzayn*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shukri was a former Ottoman officer and an Istanbul carpet importer. He was keen on the newspaper’s publication as soon as he learned that among the main objectives was the establishment of a lasting friendship between the Armenians and the Arabs. E. Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan Pokharaberutyunnere Siriayum, 1918 Hoktember -1919 Hunis” [Armenian-Arab Relations in Syria, October 1918 - June 1919] in *Merdzavor ev Mijin Arevelki Erkrner ev Joghovatsuner* (Yerevan: Science Academy, 1974), vol. 6, 128-169, 137.

<sup>2</sup> On Arab Clubs see James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 64-86; Gontaut-Biron et al, *D’Angora*, 63, Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 153.

<sup>3</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 153.

<sup>4</sup> “Al-Arab,” *Hay Dzayn*, November 25, 1918, 1.

Within the first month of its founding, the *Arab Club* of Aleppo hosted two distinguished guests, Sykes and Picot, who were touring Syria in late 1918 and early 1919, delivering speeches to reduce local expectations of complete independence.<sup>5</sup> Each time, they made sure to mention that Syrians were finally liberated from four centuries of oppression and that the liberation of *Arabs*, *Armenians*, and other oppressed peoples had been the primary motive of the French, British, and Italians in their decision to make war on the Turks.<sup>6</sup> In Aleppo, after their address, the floor was taken by the editors of *Hay Dzayn* and *Al-Arab*, who delivered flamboyant speeches.<sup>7</sup>

There can be no doubt that Armenian populations across the Middle East cheered the victory of the Allied forces with great enthusiasm. The victory had meant salvation for thousands of them who were still in prison. Among these, many had been condemned to death and waited for their execution, including the Armenian prelate of Aleppo, priest Ter Harutyun Essaian, imprisoned since 1916. The latter reported to Sahak II Catholicos immediately that, thanks to Faysal and the Arab government, 25–30,000 Armenians of Aleppo could finally breathe freely.<sup>8</sup> The anticipated salvation did not come immediately, however, and paradoxically, the abrupt retreat of the Ottoman armies left thousands of Armenian deportees, mostly women and children, to starve. From 1916 to 1918, they had been employed in various workshops furnishing the Ottoman army with clothes, socks, shoes, food, and weapons.<sup>9</sup> In these workshops, as many as 60% of the workers were reportedly Armenian refugees.<sup>10</sup> Allied forces were neither prepared to cope with the thousands of hungry and homeless refugees, nor was humanitarian relief to these refugees their priority.<sup>11</sup> Instead, aid was expected to come from the Armenian community of Egypt and the USA.<sup>12</sup> At the time of the arrival of the Allied forces, there were no more than 3,000–4,000 refugees comprising women, children, older people and the disabled, in the refugee camp located in the former Turkish army barracks, on

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<sup>5</sup> The full text of their speeches see “Khitab” [Speech], *Halab*, January 2, 1919, 1; “Fikhrat, min khitab al- kolonel Mark Sykes” [Thoughts from the Speech of Sir Mark Sykes], *Halab*, January 6, 1919, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Halab*, January 2, 1919 in K. D. Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006), 145.

<sup>7</sup> Zeine N. Zeine, *Struggle for Arab Independence: Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of Faisal’s Kingdom in Syria* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1960), 60.

<sup>8</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Vahé Tachjian, *Daily Life in the Abyss, Genocide Diaries, 1915-1918* (New York: Berghahn books, 2017), 177; *Voskematyan Hay Baregortsakan Miutyun, Artsatya Hobelian, 1906-1931* [The Silver Anniversary of the AGBU, 1906-1931], (Paris: Masis, 1935), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial, “Halepi Haykakan Gaghute” [Armenian Colony in Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 19, 1922, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Vahé Tachjian, *Daily Life*, 178.

<sup>12</sup> Tachjian, *Daily Life*, 178-179; *Voskematyan*, 155.

the outskirts of Aleppo.<sup>13</sup> Within a few weeks, however, thousands of others hurried to Aleppo from Deir ez-Zor, the Euphrates region, Damascus, and elsewhere, swelling the numbers to 80,000.<sup>14</sup> Shortly, within two to three months, most of them were repatriated to Cilicia by the Allied forces. In mid-1919, there were no more than 17,000 Armenians in Aleppo, out of which only 7,000 were in the camps.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of 1918, *Hay Dzayn* editors informed Mike Sykes that the Syrian attitude towards the Armenians was friendly and supportive.<sup>16</sup> In another article, the newspaper suggested forming a national union and meeting with Shukri al-Ayubi, who was very “supportive towards the Armenians.”<sup>17</sup> Still, a few days later, the newspaper published two successive editorials titled “Friendly Relations between the Armenians and the Arabs,” this time quoting the words of Shukri: “Armenian refugees enjoy our support, they will always be protected by the Syrian government.”<sup>18</sup> Shukri had previously punished many who were guilty of committing atrocities against the Armenians, while money confiscated from the Armenians had been reimbursed.<sup>19</sup> Shukri was not the only high-ranking official popular among the Aleppo Armenians; there was also Ali Jevdet<sup>20</sup> – the chief of the gendarmery of Aleppo.<sup>21</sup> According to some accounts, there were also many supportive high-ranking officials in Faysal’s administration, including: Ali Reza al-Rikabi, the head of the government; Satia Al-Husri, the minister of education; Favez al-Ghusein, Faysal’s personal secretary; Hashem Al-Atasi, a

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<sup>13</sup> Georges Richards, “The Medical Work of the Near East Relief; A review of its Accomplishments in Asia Minor and the Caucasus, 1919-1920,” [https://archive.org/details/ldpd\\_11045814\\_000/page/n19/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/ldpd_11045814_000/page/n19/mode/2up) (accessed on August 20, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Voskematyan*, 154.

<sup>15</sup> “Halep Qaghaq” [Aleppo City], *Suriyahay taregirk* [The Armenian Syrian yearbook] (Cairo: Zareh Berberian, 1924), 8; Georges Richards, “The Medical Work of the Near East Relief,” 20.

<sup>16</sup> Haykazun Aramian, “Turkio Het Zinadadar ev Hayere” [Armistice with Turkey and the Armenians], *Hay Dzayn*, December 1, 1918, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Kepelian “Halep Getnvogh Hayerun” [To the Armenians of Aleppo], *Hay Dzayn*, December 2, 1918, 1.

<sup>18</sup> “Siralir Haraberutyunner Hay ev Arab Azgeru Mijev” [Friendly Relations between the Armenians and the Arabs], *Hay Dzayn*, December 23, 24, 1918, 2.

<sup>19</sup> “Shukri Pasha Al-Ayubi,” *Hay Dzayn*, November 19, 1918, 1; “Shukri Pashan ev Hayere” [Shukri Pasha and the Armenians], *Hay Dzayn* December 30, 1918; Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 162.

<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of WWI, an Armenian-Arab friendship committee was formed in Cairo by the initiative of Mushegh bishop, Nubar bey, Seferian, and Ali Jevdet. The latter was apparently very proud of it and did not miss the opportunity to mention his good intentions toward the Armenians. See “Hay ev Arab Eghbayrutyun, Ali Jevdet Bey” [Armenian-Arab Brotherhood, Ali Jevdet], *Hay Dzayn*, February 18, 1919, 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, also cArabakan Ardarutyun” [The Arab Justice], *Hay Dzayn* January 26, 1919, 2.

famous politician in Damascus; Omar Fakhuri, chief editor of *Al-Asima* newspaper;<sup>22</sup> and Fares Al-Khury, a prominent politician during the interwar period.<sup>23</sup>

It is said that Ali Reza al-Rikabi was tasked by Faysal directly to tour the northern regions at least once in two weeks and pay particular attention to the Armenians.<sup>24</sup> He was, therefore, a regular guest in the Armenian prelacy of Aleppo and had reportedly said that Arabs would continue to support the Armenian refugees now as they had during WWI.<sup>25</sup>

We cannot help but wonder about the reason for this special attitude toward the Armenians? The question becomes even more important when we consider the testimony of Sisak Varjapetian,<sup>26</sup> recalling in his four-volume work on the Armenians in Lebanon that the Armenian refugees were not well received in Lebanon either by the Muslims or the local Christians. The first group feared that Lebanon's demographic balance would be altered in favor of the Christians, while the latter regarded the newcomers as competitors.<sup>27</sup> Syria, like Lebanon, had endured all the difficulties of the war, successive bad harvests, locusts, famine, and a dramatic rise in prices coinciding with a drop in trade and the destruction of trade routes. In addition, the main urban centers were flooded by poor peasants driven out of their homes either because of Bedouin raids or irregular forces who plundered the villages with impunity, in addition to the thousands of refugees. So why were the Lebanese reluctant to host a large number of refugees while the Syrians were not?

The answer to this question goes back to June 1916, when Sherif Husein of Arabia had publicly condemned Ottoman policies against the Armenians, repeating the message a second time in March 1917.<sup>28</sup> A year later, in April 1918, he issued a *fatwa*<sup>29</sup> calling on the Arabs to look after the Armenians under their rule and care for them as they would their children. As for Faysal, he was ordered to ensure the safety of their lives.<sup>30</sup> The fact that many Arabic tribes

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<sup>22</sup> He published regularly in the newspaper *Al-Haghgha* under the pen name of "Islam democrat" many supportive articles regarding the Armenian refugees, *Narine Margaryan, Hayots Tseghaspanutyán Hetevangov Sırıayum Hastatvats Hay Taragirneri Kargavıjake ev Hay-Arabakan Pokhharaberutyunnere (1915-1924)* [The Status of the Armenian Deportees Settled in Syria as a result of the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian-Arab Relations (1915-1924)] (Yerevan, 2013), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Nora Arissian, *Ghawa'il al-Arman fi al-Fıkr al-Suri* [The Armenian Atrocities in the Syrian Thought] (Beirut: Dar al-Furat, 2002) 136; Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyán*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Najaryan, "Hay-Arabakan," 161.

<sup>25</sup> Narine Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyán*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Varjapetian was an Armenian-Lebanese historian and an orphan of genocide who grew up in one of the orphanages set up by the missionaries for the Armenian orphans.

<sup>27</sup> Sisak Varjapetian, *Hayere Libanani Mej: Hanragıtaran Libanahay Gaghuti, 1920-1980, Libabanahay Norog Gaghutın Kazmavorume ev Zanazan Hastatutyunnere – Ekeghetci, Deprotc* [Armenians in Lebanon: Encyclopedia on the Armenian Colony in Lebanon, 1920-1980, The Formation of the Colony in Lebanon and its Institutions – Church, School] (Beirut: Sevan Publishing House, 1981), 2:68.

<sup>28</sup> Narine Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyán*, 45, 54.

<sup>29</sup> A *fatwa* is a legal pronouncement in Islam done by a mufti or other chief religious leaders.

<sup>30</sup> Usman al-Turk, *Min Tarıkh al uma al-armaniye* (Halab, 1960), 109; Najaryan, "Hay-Arabakan," 132.

obeyed this *fatwa* faithfully is recalled in numerous memories of the Armenians who crossed the desert and were hosted by different tribes.<sup>31</sup>

The objective behind this unconditional support is revealed in Husein's letter to the Armenian leaders in Paris,

I declare with certitude that Armenians and all other people in the *same state are our allies in good and bad times*. We ask from God enough strength to help the refugees until the whole world is aware of the *true attitude of the Muslims (toward the Christians)*.<sup>32</sup>

It clearly shows that not only did Husein see the Armenians as allies, both fighting a common enemy, but he also sought to use the Arab assistance to the Armenian refugees as a way to portray the Muslim Arabs as the providers of humanitarian aid, as opposed to the Muslim Turks, who were the perpetrators of the barbaric massacres. Later, the point was also used to showcase Syria as advanced enough to claim independence. For example, on May 9, 1919, during a meeting at which the Armenian bishop of Damascus, Eghishe Chilinkarian, was present, Faysal declared:

We must pay greater attention to the rights and demands of the minorities to overcome the hatred and religious animosity created by the Turks... We must show the Allied forces that we strive for independence; we wish to protect our elderly and young, our friends and neighbors. We respect everyone who comes to our country to work...<sup>33</sup>

Whether his last words explicitly referred to the Armenian refugees or not, the next person who took the floor was none other than Chilinkarian, the Armenian bishop. He first apologized for speaking Turkish, then thanked the Arabs for “their *continuous support and humanism (mardasirutyuan)* during the four years of war. Our history shall write the *name of Arabs with golden letters*.”<sup>34</sup>

Husein,<sup>35</sup> therefore, kept up a regular correspondence with prominent Armenian leaders.<sup>36</sup> As for Faysal, his acquaintance with the Armenians dated back to prewar Istanbul, where he had spent 19 years, as well as the Ottoman parliament, where he was the representative

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<sup>31</sup>Aram Sahakian “Damaskosits Apagha, Tseghaspanutyun Husher” [From Damascus to Apagha: Memories of Genocide], *Hayrenik*, (January, 1950), 21-33, (February); 73-85, (1950), 85-95; (1950), 56–66; Yervant Odian, *Accursed Years: My Exile and Return from Der Zor, 1914-1919*, trans, Ara Melkonian (Gomitas Institute, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> René Pinon, “Roi musulman et empereur chrétien,” in *La voix d'Arménie*, (Paris, June 1918), 362-363. (Highlighted by the author).

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. (Highlighted by the author).

<sup>35</sup> Neither Husein nor Faysal were Syrians. About the ambivalent attitude of the Syrians towards their rule and their claims to rule Syria, see Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*.

<sup>36</sup> Eghishe bishop Chillingarian, *Nkaragrutyun Erusaghemi-Halepi-Damaskosi Gaghtakanakan ev Vanakan Zanazan Dipats ev Antskeru, 1914-1918* [Description of Different Events at the Refugees' Camps and Monastery from Jerusalem-Aleppo-Damascus] (Alexandria, 1922), 66.

for Mecca and Jeddah.<sup>37</sup> Like his father, Faysal made sure to invite and honor all the important Armenian figures on all occasions. For example, on October 18, 1918, when he had organized a reception in Damascus<sup>38</sup> to celebrate Syrian independence, both the priest Essaian and the bishop Chilinkarian were invited and made speeches.<sup>39</sup> Three weeks later, on November 11, 1918, Faysal was in Aleppo, where he hosted a reception, to which many notables of various communities, including the Armenians, were invited.<sup>40</sup> During the reception, Faysal delivered an important speech addressed to the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Aleppo. He began by painting a dark picture of Turkish rule and oppression. He then declared that “the success of our victory... *has been the unity of all the Arabs, be they Muslim, Christian or Jewish. And we hope to build and strengthen our state based on this desired unity.*”<sup>41</sup>

The speech appealed for Arab unity, where he emphasized the national rather than the religious character of such unity, which would afford a place to all the communities. While in Aleppo, Faysal was honored by an invitation to the first event organized by the Armenian refugees – a choral performance.<sup>42</sup> Faysal then continued his trip to Tripoli and Beirut.

### **The Beirut and the Aleppo incidents and their interpretations**

Shortly after Faysal’s arrival in Beirut, the first violence involving the Armenian legionnaires occurred. Although it was a small incident resulting from a misunderstanding, it found its place in historiography under the name “the first Armenian-Muslim clashes.”<sup>43</sup> There are several versions of what happened. According to an Armenian source written many years after the incident, Faysal was accompanied by legionnaires comprising both Armenians and Arabs. In Beirut, Faysal was greeted by hundreds of Muslim youth who chanted joyfully slogans “*La narda, illa as-sultan*” (we will not have anyone (to rule us) except the Sultan), the Sultan, in this case, being Faysal.<sup>44</sup> The Armenian legionnaires who did not understand Arabic, thought

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<sup>37</sup> Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 83-84.

<sup>38</sup> It is noteworthy that the reception venue had been chosen the publishing house of *Muktabas* newspaper, edited by Kurd Ali. Very often the famous newspapers hosted the receptions in all major cities, this speaks by itself of the importance of the newspapers and the editors.

<sup>39</sup> They spoke in Turkish since none of them could speak Arabic, Chilinkarian, *Nkaragrutyun*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> The French-language publication that claims there were no Christians participating in the receptions of Faysal in Aleppo is not accurate. This account also claims that anti-Christian discourse started in Aleppo right after the departure of Faysal, as they were accused of being pro-French. *Les massacres d’Alep Raaport d’un témoin oculaire* (Paris, Ardzakanak, 1919), 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Chilinkarian, *Nkaragrutyun*, 29; Zeine, *Struggle*, 48. (Highlighted by the author).

<sup>42</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 138.

<sup>43</sup> The wording by Longrigg, *Syria*, 80. Numerous Armenian and even French sources present it as rather small incident, Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 139; Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 102; Gautherot, *La France*, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Zeine, *Struggle*, 49.



the youth referred to the Ottoman Sultan and tried to silence them.<sup>45</sup> The memoirs of a legionnaire lieutenant, Portugalian, and of a French officer, Gustave Gautherot, the chief of the operations of the French forces in the Levant, give identical accounts of what happened. Several legionnaires made a purchase in the central square in Beirut – Place des Canons – and made their payment in Egyptian pounds, the money in which they were paid. The seller demanded Turkish banknotes, throwing the Egyptian banknotes on the ground.<sup>46</sup>

Once the quarrel started, the local policeman (Muslim), who approached immediately, fired his pistol in the air. The fight ended shortly after, leaving four dead and 16 wounded.<sup>47</sup> What made this seemingly “negligible and small incident” so important were two factors – the timing and how it was presented. In both cases, it was meant to serve a special purpose. Why? The incident happened on November 17, 1918, just a day after the arrival of Faysal in Beirut and just a day before his departure to Europe to participate in the Paris Peace Conference. Faysal’s trip was both initiated and facilitated by the British. He also embarked on an English boat, sailing first to England and then traveling to Paris, where he was not an expected guest. The French made all possible efforts to keep him away from Paris, and, when he eventually arrived, he did not receive the honors he would have expected.<sup>48</sup> In the meantime, the French attempted to discredit him in all possible ways. The timing of the Beirut incident was excellent, and it was widely used to this end. Usually, the Beirut and Aleppo incidents are presented jointly to claim that “These men of different races are accustomed to tear each other apart,”<sup>49</sup> as is asserted in the memoirs of Gustave Gautherot. Gautherot concluded that even the interests of Syrians themselves dictated that “we do not allow such a danger... to prevail the superior rights of humanity over the illegal and vain ambition of the son of the desert (sic, Faysal).”<sup>50</sup> The reasons for presenting both incidents together are the same – the context, timing, and the need to discredit Faysal since France still sensed a British-Syrian conspiracy against its interests in the region. Thus, France was keen to use any incident to discredit Faysal and show that not only was his government incapable of protecting his own Christian population but that the Sharifyan forces were directly involved in the massacres.

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<sup>45</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 139.

<sup>46</sup> When the Allied powers entered Syria, a variety of coins and paper money was in circulation. To put an end to the chaos, General Allenby mandated the use of the sterling backed Egyptian pound, which was scarce outside of Damascus and urban Palestine. Syrians were not happy with the introduction of the currency, especially in Aleppo where they traded with Anatolia and the coast and feared being cut off from the markets outside of Syria, see in J. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Pattie, *The Armenian Legionnaires*, 137-138; Gautherot, *La France*, 103, 137-138.

<sup>48</sup> More on this see E. Thomsson, *How the West*.

<sup>49</sup> [Entre ces hommes de races différentes habitués à s’entre-déchirer], Gautherot, *La France*, 111.

<sup>50</sup> [Nous faisons prévaloir – sur l’illigime et vaine ambition d’un fils du desert – les droits supérieurs de l’humanité], *Ibid*, 121.

Armenian sources claim that the incident gave birth to regular exchange and much warmer relations between the Syrian and the Armenian elites.<sup>51</sup> After this incident, Armenians took to the streets of Beirut and Damascus, demanding that the Légion should be split into two and the Armenian part sent immediately to Cilicia.<sup>52</sup> Both demands were soon met.

As evidence of the supportive Syrian attitude, Armenian sources also mention two major gatherings that were not only allowed by the local authorities in Aleppo but also attended by them. The first took place at the beginning of December (1918), and the second in mid-January 1919, when 50,000 Armenians commemorated the massacres.<sup>53</sup> Among the present crowd, there were many high-ranking Alepines, including Shukri, Jevdet, and Ziyadé, the head of the police.<sup>54</sup>

An important factor explaining why the Syrian attitude was positive might have been a simple fact; the Armenian presence was largely regarded as temporary. This was true until the signature of the Lausanne Treaty (July 1923). It is obvious from the speech of Emir Ali Naser, the commander of the Arab forces in northern Syria: “the new Armenia will become your mother and father; in the meantime, the Arab government has the duty to take care of you.”<sup>55</sup> An immediate solution to the Armenian issue seemed underway, especially when in January 1919, the French authorities, almost immediately upon their arrival, had embarked on resettling Armenian refugees in Cilicia in an attempt to create a “national home” – a Christian-Armenian puppet state similar to the Maronite-Lebanese state.<sup>56</sup>

Religious leaders and intellectuals were not the only groups with whom Faysal was in constant contact; the Armenian political parties and ARF representatives, in particular, were also well-known to him. A group of ARF members, accompanied by a Druze friend, had crossed the desert during WWI to join the Légion. On their way, they were hosted by Faysal and his brothers. They reportedly kept in touch with each other. One of the ARF members and participants in these events told the story years later. He mentioned that Faysal and the ARF representatives met in Beirut for the first time after the War at the house of Omar Dauq, the mayor of Beirut, at the beginning of 1919.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Joghoverdi Dzayn* (Istanbul), December 4, 5, 1919 cited in Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 140.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>53</sup> Editorial, “Halepi Haykakan Miutyán Sharjume” [The Movement of the Union of Aleppo], *Hay Dzayn*, December 6, 1918, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 162. “Hamazgayin Segahandes” [Pannational Mourning Day] *Hay Dzayn*, January 20, 22, 1919, 1; H. Aramian, “Segahandesin Patmakan Ore” [The Historic Day of the Mourning], *Hay Dzayn*, January 25, 1919, 1; “Hamazgayin Segahandes Halepi Mej,” *Arev*, January 29, 1919, 1.

<sup>55</sup> “Der Zori Hayer” [Armenians in Deir ez-Zor], *Hay Dzayn*, December 31, 1918, 2.

<sup>56</sup> CADN 21829, Confidential report, *L'occupation française en Cilicie*, 1921.

<sup>57</sup> Sahakian, “Damaskosen Apagha,” *Hayrenik*, April, 1950, 161.

Another level of these relations was, of course, Faysal's correspondence with Nubar, the head of the *délégation nationale arménienne* (hereafter DNA)<sup>58</sup> and his in-person meeting with Nubar in Paris in January 1919.<sup>59</sup> During this meeting, the conditions of the Armenian refugees were discussed, and a significant sum was handed over to Faysal in order to provide food and shelter for them.<sup>60</sup> On February 27, 1919, *Al-Asima* published a governmental decision to provide monthly financial assistance, food, and daily necessities to the needy refugees.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the claims that the Syrian government spent 45,000 Egyptian pounds (PE) on the Armenian refugees, at a time when it faced insolvency, are inaccurate.<sup>62</sup> Other accounts also claim that the Armenian refugees<sup>63</sup> were not a burden on the Arab government and that those in need were cared for either by the local Armenian community or by diverse charities.<sup>64</sup>

The Faysal-Nubar meeting in Paris and the agreement achieved proved decisive for the major incident that would happen in Aleppo on the last day of February of 1919.<sup>65</sup>

During this meeting, Nubar requested, and Faysal agreed to facilitate the release of Armenian women and children held in Muslim households.<sup>66</sup> After the arrival of the Allied forces, random rescue missions had been implemented<sup>67</sup> before the establishment of a dedicated commission in Istanbul and Aleppo.<sup>68</sup> In Aleppo these works were led by the legendary

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<sup>58</sup> DNA was formed in 1912 to negotiate and achieve reforms in the Ottoman Armenian vilayets. It was mandated by both the Armenian catholicos of Edjmiatsin (Eastern or Russian Armenia) and the Armenian Istanbul patriarchate (Ottoman Armenia). It claimed to be the only responsible body for the Ottoman Armenians.

<sup>59</sup> It is noteworthy that many of these letters were published in Arabic in the local newspaper of *Al-Afkar*, see in Nora Arissian, *Asda' ibada al-Armaniyya fi al-Sahafa al-Suriyya, 1877-1930* [The Echoes of the Armenian Genocide in the Syrian Press] (Beirut: Zakira Press, 2004), 271-272.

<sup>60</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:56; Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 89.

<sup>61</sup> Nora Arissian, *Asda' ibada*, 354; N. Margaryan, "Hay Taragirneri Siriayum Feysal Ibn Huseini Ishkhanutyun Tarinerin, October 1918-July 1920" [The Armenian Deportees in Syria during the Reign of Feysal Ibn Huseyn, October 1918-July 1920], *Patmabanaisakan Handes*, 3 (2019), 146-167, 156.

<sup>62</sup> Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> An estimated 25-30,000 Armenians had a family member to share a room, the camp hosted only 3000 persons including women, children, elderly and disabled – those who could not work. *Les Massacres d'Alep*.

<sup>64</sup> The author who claims to be an eyewitness of the massacres also mentions that the local Armenian community organized regular cultural events to support the refugees. *Les massacres d'Alep*, 6; "Near East Report," 19.

<sup>65</sup> Nubar, Aghaton and Papazian were present; Faysal was with Laurence, see in Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:56-57.

<sup>66</sup> Jafar al-Askari testified it, see William Facey et al, *A Soldier's Story, From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq, The Memories of Jafar Pasha al-Askeri, 1885-1936* (London, Arabian Pub. House, 2003), 161-167.

<sup>67</sup> In Aleppo it was performed by John Dunaway and Stanley Kerr, both were NER practitioners. According to their testimony, they were armed during such missions, because they were not popular among the Bedouins. Within a few months, they were able to cover practically every village within a radius of 50 miles from Aleppo rescuing 450 girls, see in Rebecca Jinks, "Marks Hard to Erase: The Troubled reclamation of "absorbed" Armenian women, 1919-1927," *American Historical Review* (2018), 98. For similar rescue missions in Mosul, Sinjar, Istanbul, and internal regions see Zaven Archbishop, *Patriarkakan Hushers: Vaveragirner ev V kayutyunner* [My Memoires of Patriarchate: Documents and Testimonies] (Cairo: Nor astegh, 1947), 253-260, 287-298.

<sup>68</sup> More on this rescue efforts see Kevonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire: les acteurs européens et la scene proche-orientale pendant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne 2004); R. Jinks, "Marks Hard to Erase"; Vahram Shemmassian, "The League of Nations and the Reclamation of Armenian Genocide Survivors" in Richard Hovannisian, *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide* (Transaction Publishers, 2003), 81-112; Ara Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim

missionary Karen Jeppe even before her official appointment as the LoN's representative for rescuing Armenian women and children in Aleppo in March 1922.<sup>69</sup>

With this agreement, Faysal pledged his support to these efforts by ordering all the Syrians to release captive Armenians, *even those with whom Syrians had married officially*.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Al-Rikabbi was tasked immediately with finding out which tribes had sheltered Armenians in order to organize their handover.<sup>71</sup> Strict punishments were threatened in the case of a refusal. It was believed that many tribes, Anezi and Shammar, in particular, had hosted thousands of Armenians.<sup>72</sup> The tribes, naturally, were not happy with these decisions and sought to find ways to keep the additional free working hands that the Armenians had provided. In the immediate after-war years, many tribes had suffered greatly because of disrupted trade routes, declining caravan trade, and insecurity, as well as reduced livestock, bad harvests, locusts, and drought, to name but a few problems.<sup>73</sup> Notably, once the orders were made, quick marriages were arranged for many women and young girls according to Muslim law to render their departure impossible.<sup>74</sup>

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Households as a Structural Component of The Armenian Genocide,” in Omer Bartov et al, *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Berghahn Books, 2001); Vahé Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide,” *Nations and Nationalism* N:15 (2009), 60-80; Inger Marie Okkenhaug, “Religion, Relief and Humanitarian Work among Armenian Women Refugees in Mandatory Syria, 1927-1934,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 40:3, 432-454; Lerna Ekmekcioglu, “A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion During and after the Armenian Genocide,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* N:55 (2013), 522-553; Keith D. Watenpaugh, “Are There Any Children for Sale? Genocide and The Transfer of Armenian Children (1915-1922),” *Journal of Human Rights* N:12 (2003), 283-295.

<sup>69</sup> Karen Jeppe had arrived in Urfa as a missionary in 1903, witnessing the deportations and the Genocide of the local Armenians. She arrived in Aleppo in 1920 where she stayed until her death (1935). For more on her activities in Urfa and beyond see Karen Jeppe, *Misak: An Armenian Life*, trans. by Jonas Kauffeldt (London: Gomitas Institute, 2015); for her activities in Aleppo, see Matthias Bjornlund and Elyse Semerdjian, “Karen Jeppe (1876-1935): “Mother of Armenians,” *Hushamadyan* (2020), <https://www.hushamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayetaleppo/sandjak-of-aleppo/religion/missionaries.html> (accessed on October 10, 2022). The files of each rescued individual by the rescue mission led by Jeppe can be found here <http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/orphan-children.nsf!OpenDatabase>. See also Sir John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem*, 35.

<sup>70</sup> *Cilicia*, June 27, 1919 cited in Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghasp.*, 40. *Hay Dzayn*, February 2, 1919, Najaryan, 167.

<sup>71</sup> Faysal's telegram see in *Joghovardi Dzayn*, January 22, 1919, cited in Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 167.

<sup>72</sup> According to one report, there were about 2000 Armenians at the Shammar tribe alone, see in “Une tournée à la dérobée en Mésopotamie,” *La voix d'Arménie*, (Paris, May 15, 1918), 356-357; “Hayeru Nergaghte” [The Repatriation of the Armenians] *Cilicia* May 23, 1919.

<sup>73</sup> On the tribes in the Syrian desert, Laura Stocker, “The “Camel Dispute”: Cross-border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929-1934,” in *Regimes of Mobility, Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946*, ed., Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 319–350. On the declined trade routes that were increasingly replaced by cars and tracks, see César Jaquier, “Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings: A History of the Baghdad-Damascus Route, 1923-1939” (PhD diss., University of Neuchâtel, 2022); On locusts, see Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East, 1858-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

<sup>74</sup> *Les massacres d'Alep*, 11.

All the orders were published in the local newspaper *Al-Taqaddum*.<sup>75</sup> While Armenian accounts regarded these actions positively as an act that facilitated the release of numerous women and children,<sup>76</sup> other sources, especially the account of Alepine historian Kamil al-Ghazzi, revealed that, in fact, it was not regarded well by the Syrians; many families were broken apart, Muslim children were being taken away from their parents by force, Arab families who had adopted these Christian women and children and treated them like their own, were now forced to give them away, often against the wishes of these women and children.<sup>77</sup>

As of February 20, 1919, compulsory migration of all the Armenian refugees to Cilicia was initiated by the French authorities.<sup>78</sup> The plan had three stages, the first of which was the liberation of the captive Armenian women and children.<sup>79</sup> The operations had already started in January and resulted in the arrival of about 1,000 women and children in Aleppo in early February.<sup>80</sup> Similar operations were underway in Cilicia too, where a commission was established at Adana railway station.<sup>81</sup> The train station was a strategic location for the commission, because there were about 20,000 demobilized Ottoman soldiers returning home, many of whom used the railway.<sup>82</sup> As it turned out, many of these military personnel were accompanied by women and children, whom they claimed to be their family members.<sup>83</sup> In reality, however, many were Armenians taken during the deportations.<sup>84</sup> The aim of the Adana mission, therefore, was twofold: legionnaires were tasked with controlling the station and train and disarming all the soldiers, while the commission was instructed to find out the identity of

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<sup>75</sup> *Al-Taqaddum* as compiled by Aleksandir Keshishian, *Safahat watha'iqiyah min jardiadat al-Taqaddum al-Halabiyah 'an al-ahwal al-Arminiyyah wa al-Arabiyyah fi al-Dawlah al-'Uthmaniyyah wa al-bilad al-Shamiyyah* [Documentary Pages from the Alepine newspaper *al-Taqaddum* about the Conditions of the Armenians and Arabs in the Ottoman State and the lands of Syria] (Aleppo: Dar Talas, 1996), 324:

<sup>76</sup> *Cilicia*, June 27, 1919 cited in Najaryan, "Hay-Arabakan," 167; Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyan*.

<sup>77</sup> Kamil al-Ghazzi, *Nahr al-dhahab fi tarkh Halab*, vol. 3:714-728.

<sup>78</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> CADN-SL 322, 17 fevrier 1919, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés*, 44, 40-64.

<sup>80</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés*, 44.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 51-52.

<sup>82</sup> 21,000 demobilized soldiers from the Ottoman army were returning home, naturally with Turkish uniforms. While the majority of these returning soldiers were Turks there were also Arabs. The entrance of the Turks into the territory under the Allied occupation was forbidden, moreover, all the Turks residing in Syria, if not married to an Arab were given deadlines to leave Syria. On the Islahiye-Adana railway line, French authorities had tasked Armenian legionnaires to check the trains and to disarm all the demobilized ex-Ottoman army soldiers. See in Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 43,45.

<sup>83</sup> The American consul in Aleppo reported that during the War and afterward, "according to reports from reliable sources the accompanying gendarmes were told that they may do as they wish with the (Armenian) women and girls," in Ara Sarafian, "The Lower Euphrates in the United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide," *Armenian Review*, vol. 1 (1993), 15.

<sup>84</sup> The legionnaires were also tasked to check the identity of the accompanying children and women, in search for Armenians. One source mentions that indeed, most of the children and women were Armenians, who were then held at the station in Adana, see in *Les massacres d'Alep*, 17 – 20.

the accompanying persons. If their Armenian identity was proved, they were held back. It is not surprising that such large-scale rescue operations left many dissatisfied.

In the same vein, Armenian legionnaires were ordered to prevent the return of the Turkish soldiers to Aleppo, as all the Turks residing in Aleppo vilayet were to be expelled to Turkey.<sup>85</sup> The rescue operations were done at a time when Syrians were greatly irritated by the infamous speech of the French Foreign Minister, Stephan Pichon, made on December 29, 1918, in the French parliament.<sup>86</sup> His speech has rarely been quoted fully, therefore the link between the speech and the ensuing massacre has not been established until today. Here we give the full picture. Referring to Turkey, Pichon announced, “We have incontestable rights in their Empire to safeguard; we have them in Syria, Lebanon, Cilicia, and Palestine. They are based on historical titles, on agreements, and contracts.”<sup>87</sup> When rebuffed by the socialist deputy Marcel Cachin, who stated that the Syrians demanded independence and it was the most important contract for France, Pichon replied, “they are also based on the aspirations and wishes of the populations who have long been our customers.”<sup>88</sup> Pichon then unexpectedly ended his speech about Syria by declaring, “We cannot, Sirs, be indifferent toward the fate of the unfortunate Armenians, whom we have obliged ourselves to protect against the misfortunes may be repeated any time.”<sup>89</sup> He then immediately shifted the conversation to the French African possessions, former German colonies, and Russia. Thus, the Armenians were made the only “clients” in all the territories he had mentioned previously. Ironically enough, some Armenian newspapers saw in this declaration yet another pledge to the Armenian cause by the French.<sup>90</sup> Could the newspaper or anyone else predict the great danger these declarations would cause the Armenians just in two months’ time? Why only the Armenians of Aleppo and no word about

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<sup>85</sup> The very first edition of *Halab* had announced on its second page the governmental decision to register the names of all the Turks residing in Aleppo. Those who were married to Arab women and those who had trade relations were to stay, while those who had none of those had to depart. See in P. S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 147–148, Watenpugh, “Cleansing the Cosmopolitan City: Historicism, Journalism and the Arab Nation in the Post-Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean,” *Social History* 30:1 (2005), 1–24, 9.

<sup>86</sup> British diplomatic records claim that this speech was responsible for the Aleppo massacre, see in FO 371/3658, 47515/471516/512/58 cited in Hovhannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, 321.

<sup>87</sup> [Nous avons dans leur empire des droits incontestable à sauvegarder ; nous en avons en Syrie, dans le Liban, en Cilicie, en Palestine. Ils sont fondés sur des titres historiques, sur des accords, sur des contrats], *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés, 2<sup>e</sup> séance du 29 Décembre 1918*, 3716, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6465508d/f28.item> (accessed on March 9, 2021).

<sup>88</sup> [Ils sont fondés aussi sur les aspirations et les vœux des populations qui depuis longtemps sont nos clients], *Ibid.* (Highlighted by the author).

<sup>89</sup> [Nous ne pouvons, messieurs, nous désintéresser non plus du sort de la malheureuse Arménie, que nous sommes constamment amenés à protéger contre le retour toujours possible des pires calamités], *Ibid.* René Pinon, “Indépendance, intégrité, assistance, réparations,” *La Voix de l’Arménie*, (Paris) Janvier 1919, 1–2.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

the Maronites and the other Catholic communities? Did it have anything to do with the rejection of the French mandate by the Armenian elite? It all remains unclear.

Unsurprisingly, when news of this speech reached Syria, it gave rise to a number of demonstrations and expressions of discontent, especially in Aleppo and northern Syria.<sup>91</sup> It was said that the British authorities had done everything to prevent the news from being reported in Syria.<sup>92</sup> This region, indeed, not only hosted the most Armenians (both indigenous and refugee) but the large-scale rescue efforts were also at their height. The same famous *Arab Club* of Aleppo led the demonstrations. By now, *Arab Clubs* (Damascus and Aleppo, in particular) had already become famous for experimenting with innovative techniques of mass mobilization by distributing fliers at homes and coffeehouses and organizing neighborhood-based militias.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, some of its members were also renowned for pioneering innovative theatrical techniques for spreading news and “anti-Christian” political propaganda from coffeehouse to coffeehouse.<sup>94</sup>

The largest demonstration against Pichon’s infamous speech was initiated by the Aleppo *Arab Club* and scheduled to take place in Aleppo on Friday, February 28. Not only was the demonstration authorized by the local Arab authorities, Jevdet and Al-Ayubi, but efforts were made to employ all of the above-mentioned innovative techniques to attract a large number of participants. Fliers were distributed at homes and coffee houses, and posters put up everywhere.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, since the *Arab Club* of Aleppo also supervised chapters in al-Furat (Syrian Jazira), Baghdad, and Mosul,<sup>96</sup> a large number of Bedouin were also expected. Indeed, an Armenian source mentions their presence.<sup>97</sup> That the Bedouin had an interest in being there is without doubt; if not to protest against the speech, then to challenge the government’s decision to take away the captive Armenian women and children.

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<sup>91</sup> Gontaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 206.

<sup>92</sup> Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 229-230.

<sup>93</sup> In fact, *Arab Club* shared with the Arab government responsibility for providing certain public services normally under retained under exclusive state control, such as the organization of auxiliary police units in Damascus, that were in direct contact with the *makhatir* (head of the courters) and the leaders of the quarters. It also played an important role in organizing for the Arab government petition campaigns and demonstrations. The Club was also responsible for staging demonstrations specially on the eve of the arrival of King-Crane Commission, Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 66, 71, 70-73.

<sup>94</sup> For example, Ma’ruf al-Arna’ut, a playwright and newspaper editor, was expelled from Damascus and arrested in Aleppo. He had reportedly suggested after the Aleppo incident to stage the same in Damascus. See in J. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 75.

<sup>95</sup> *Les massacres d’Alep*, 18.

<sup>96</sup> Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 79, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 166-167; More on this see, also Onik Panikyan, *Mahits depi Kyanq* [From Death to Life] (Yerevan, 1965).

In all these preparations, there was no word about the Armenians. However, the attitude of *Al-Arab* had changed, and its chief editor, Al-Sarraj,<sup>98</sup> had suddenly become suspicious. A few days before the demonstration, an article titled “The Armenian and the Arab” was penned by Al-Sarraj, where he claimed that “Armenian political parties, bandits and individuals attack and kill mercilessly Arabs in northern Syria and Cilicia...”<sup>99</sup> As proof of Armenian misbehavior, he provided a few examples, an inspection of the train in Adana by the legionnaires, mistreatment of an ex-Ottoman officer and retaining of his women unlawfully and by force. It is noteworthy that both incidents involved him personally, and the officer in question was his brother. What, however, he failed to mention in his article was that the officer had refused to disarm, and the accompanying woman was identified as an Armenian.<sup>100</sup> His anger grew even stronger when, a few days before the demonstration, the French authorities censored his paper, *Al-Arab*.<sup>101</sup> A new newspaper under the name of *Hakuk al-Bashar* quickly appeared and resumed a targeted campaign against the Armenians.<sup>102</sup>

On the last Friday of February, the Alepines and Armenians alike woke up to hear the terrible news about the massacres of the Armenians.

### **The Aleppo massacre and its representation**

This section does not provide a detailed account of the massacre which is available elsewhere.<sup>103</sup> Instead, it aims to show the context in which it happened and how it was recorded

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<sup>98</sup> Al-Sarraj was also the liaison between Damascus and Aleppo Clubs. Furthermore, according to some french reports he was also a member of the ‘Circle of Sacrifice’, a terrorist cell whose sole purpose was the ‘elimination’ of anyone who advocated pro-French policies’. Galvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 84.

<sup>99</sup> Kepelian, “Hay ev Arab Harabrutunnere,” *Hay Dzayn* February 23, 1919, 1; Aramean, “Arab ev Hay Eghbayrutyun,” *Hay Dzayn*, February 27, 1919, 1; Gontaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 207; Hogeeks, “Halepi Jarde” [The Massacres of Aleppo] *Cilicia* (Adana), March 14, 1919), 1-2; *Les massacres d’Alep*, 18-19.

<sup>100</sup> *Les massacres d’Alep*, 20.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Raymond Kévorkian, “La Cilicie, des massacres d’Adana au mandat français, 1909-1921,” *Revue d’histoire Arménienne contemporaine*, numero special, tome III, (1999), 304.

<sup>103</sup> Gotaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 206-211; For a detailed description of the attack, see H. Topuzyan, *Siriayi eb Libanani Haykakan Gaghtojahneri Patmutyun, 1841-1946* [History of the Armenian Communities in Syria and Lebanon, 1841-1946] (Yerevan 1986), 214-220; “Halepi Jarde” [The Massacres of Aleppo], *Veratsmund* (Paris) April 15, 1919, 123-124; “Halepi kotoratse,” *Cilicia* March 14, 1919; Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East, Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 202-207; Simon Payaslian, “Diasporan Subalternities: The Armenian Community in Syria,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 16:1/2 (2007), 103-104; Eliezer Tauber, *The Formation of Modern Syria and Iraq* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 88-89; Vahé Tachjian, “Du rapatriement en Cilicie au nouvel exode vers la Syrie et le Liban,” in *Les Arméniens, la quête d’un refuge, 1917-1939*, ed., Raymond Kévorkian, et. al. (Beirut, Presses de l’université Saint-Joseph, 2006), 40-41; Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 43-45, 82; Levon Chormislian, *Hamapatker Arevmtahay Mek Daru Patmutian* [A Panorama of One Century of Western Armenian History], Vol. 3, (Beirut: Sevan, 1975), 519-520; Margaryan, *Hayots tseghaspanutyun*, 158. Most recently this episode is treated in detail using rich primary and secondary sources, including eyewitness accounts and archival



afterward, resulting in many false assumptions. A different interpretation of this event is important in our view, for it helps us understand why and how Armenian-Syrian relations are presented in the way they are in the dominant historiography. It will also demonstrate how the same pattern was applied systematically to other similar events. During the interwar period, there was only one such major event, the massacres of the Armenians in Damascus during the Syrian Revolt, which we will examine in detail in Part III.

On the day of the demonstration, February 28, a large crowd had gathered by 6 am. After chanting anti-French slogans, they immediately turned their attention to the Armenians, and a coordinated attack followed. According to the British official accounts, there were 50 dead, 100 wounded, and 30 disappeared.<sup>104</sup> However, the numbers put forward by the local Armenians were much higher; between 1,000 and 1,500 dead and wounded.<sup>105</sup> Calm was restored by the British forces. An investigative commission was set up immediately, and 200 persons were arrested, among them many high-ranking police and members of the gendarmery.<sup>106</sup> A few of them were executed immediately, while hundreds were jailed.<sup>107</sup> Significantly, the first action of the Armenian leaders after the Cilician evacuation would be to demand the release of those still in prison, as we shall see later.

As expected, the news of the massacres was covered widely, both locally and internationally. At that time, Faysal was still in Paris and had already presented, in person, the Syrian demands before the Peace Conference in early February. The massacre once again provided an opportunity for the French to blackmail Faysal and “prove the unreadiness of the Syrians for independence.”<sup>108</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that many Western accounts presented it as “clashes between the Sherifyan army and the Christians,”<sup>109</sup> clearly implying government participation in massacring its Christian populations. This, of course, led to the tendency to claim that Syrian-Armenian relations were hostile. It is telling that the same wording was used by the French and Armenian members of the investigative Commission as well as the Armenian

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materials by Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s Christians and The Formation of the Syrian Nation-State, 1920-1936,” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2021), 75-96.

<sup>104</sup> *Jamanak* (Istanbul) March 24, 1919, *Cilicia* March 12, 14, 1919, Mikayel Natanian, “Surio Kharnakutyunere ev Hayere” [The Syrian Disturbances and the Armenians], *Arev*, October 31, 1925, 1.

<sup>105</sup> Some sources mentioned that 3000 Armenians were drugged out of their houses and brought to the police station where most of them were beaten to death and thrown into the canals. Their bodies, therefore, could not be found and counted. See in HAA, fond 282, list 1, file 19, 1-4; Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan”, 151; *Les Massacres*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> This commission was composed of two British, one French, two Armenians, and three Arabs; Sertar, “Halepi Depkere” [Aleppo Events], *Cilicia* March 12, 1919, 2; Gontaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 208.

<sup>107</sup> *Cilicia*, 14, 23 May 1919; 7, 17 June 1919.

<sup>108</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 162.

<sup>109</sup> Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon*, 80, Gontaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 207.

press of the time.<sup>110</sup> These claims had a considerable impact on the Armenians. Both Al-Ayubi and Jevdet, previously popular, were pronounced guilty “because they did not prevent the bloodshed”<sup>111</sup> and were removed from their positions.<sup>112</sup>

The Arab government, in its turn, used the opportunity to remove many anti-Faysal officials, replacing them with the “foreigners,” mostly Palestinians.<sup>113</sup> Alepines, already irritated by the dominance of Damascus and the presence of a large number of Iraqis, Hejazits, and now Palestinians in their local administration, became even more furious. Merely three weeks after the incident, police officers and *mukhtars* (heads) of different neighborhoods toured the city, registered Armenians, and informed them that they had three days to leave for Cilicia.<sup>114</sup> As a result, the number of those ready to take the roads to Cilicia on foot increased dramatically.<sup>115</sup> Within three months, Aleppo was almost emptied of its Armenian inhabitants; between January and July 1919, 74,000 Armenians were transferred to Cilicia.<sup>116</sup>

As the Allied forces rushed to use the incident for their own purposes, so did the Arab government. The *Committee of Arabian Brotherhood*<sup>117</sup> comprising Armenians, Muslims, and Jews, was quickly established. Intensified Syrian-Armenian high-level meetings took place daily in order to repair “misunderstandings.”<sup>118</sup> On June 2, 1919, Faysal himself visited the Armenian prelacy accompanied by the newly appointed governor Jafar Al-Askariy.<sup>119</sup> The committee was meant to promote inter-communal harmony and to demonstrate to the Allied forces “the true level of civilization in Syria.”<sup>120</sup> The Armenians highly appreciated the committee and felt protected.<sup>121</sup> Each time, when the atmosphere was tense in Aleppo, the committee’s influential members visited the Armenian prelacy to reassure the Armenians.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “Halepi Depke” [The Aleppo Incident], *Cilicia* March 9 1919, 2; “Teghjakan Lurer,” March 16, 1919, 2.

<sup>111</sup> “Dardzyl Kotoratc,” “Halepi Kotaratse” [The Aleppo Massacre], *Cilicia*, March 14, 1919, 1.

<sup>112</sup> “Tghtaktsutyunner” [Exchange of Letters], *Cilicia*, March 26, 1919, 1.

<sup>113</sup> Watenpugh, *Being Modern*, 200-201.

<sup>114</sup> “Tghtaktsutyunner,” *Cilicia* March 26, 1919, 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> CADN-SL 576, “L’Arménie et les Arméniens,” Report of colonel Brémont, Beyrouth, 26 decembre 1919.

<sup>117</sup> In the Armenian sources the name is registered as “Armenian-Arab friendship committee.”

<sup>118</sup> Kamil al-Ghazzi mentioned a few weeks later a tea reception hosted by the Armenian prelacy to which about 52 notables of Aleppo were invited from different communities, including the new governor Al-Askariy, Kamil al-Ghazzi, *Nahr al-dhahab*, 739.

<sup>119</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 164.

<sup>120</sup> J. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 82.

<sup>121</sup> Among the members there were Naji bey – the head of the civilian section of the military commander, the head of the police, the finance officer, and the family of famous Jabries, while from the Armenian side – the head of the prelacy – priest Harutyun Esayan, Armen Mazlumyan of the Baron hotel, Khachatur Shahen and Natanian himself, see in Natanyan, “Hay-Arab Barekamutyany Komitnere Surio Mej” [The Armenian-Arab Friendship Committees in Syria], *Arev*, April 24, 1924, 1; “Hay-Arab Haraberutyunnere Surio Mej, Skhal Akhtajanutyune me” [Armenian-Arab Relations, A Wrong Diagnocies], *Yeprat*, May 10, 1930, 1.

<sup>122</sup> The committee ceased to function right after the arrival of the French, which resulted in the departure of the influential members of the committee from Aleppo.

One such tense moment had been on the eve of the arrival of the French forces in Aleppo. Ironically, with the French arrival, the committee ceased to exist, resulting in the flight of the influential committee members from Syria.

Armenian-Arab relations during the pre-mandate formative years have been studied previously by both Armenian and Syrian historians alike. Among the Armenian historians, it has been studied by Najaryan and Topuzyan from the communist perspective<sup>123</sup> and most recently by Narine Margaryan.<sup>124</sup> All these works focused their attention on the relations between the elites of both communities – Sherif Husein, Amir Faysal, Shukri al-Ayubi, Ali Jevdet on the one hand; and the head of Armenian prelacy, Catholicos, other prominent religious leaders and intellectuals, members of Armenian national union, and finally the DNA. In sharp contrast to what the Western historiography claims, these accounts present Armenian-Syrian relations as cordial, except for a few “misunderstandings.”

Armenian language historiography usually devotes a small paragraph to the Aleppo events. In general, it tends to claim that the “Aleppo massacres could not have been initiated locally.”<sup>125</sup> Najaryan, although he mentions the presence of the tribal chieftains, still refuses to acknowledge any local interference.<sup>126</sup> The dominant opinion is that the Turkish forces were behind it, taking into account the intensified Turkish propaganda in Syria.<sup>127</sup> These accounts claim that, since the Armenian Légion was already in Cilicia, Turkish nationalists sought to prevent Armenian immigration there.<sup>128</sup> In addition, Najaryan contends that the cordial Arab-Armenian relations were badly regarded by pro-Turkish circles in Aleppo.<sup>129</sup> Putting the entire blame on Turkish propaganda is not, however, accurate. According to multiple accounts, this propaganda intensified during the summer and autumn, in particular.<sup>130</sup> That is to say, many months after the event. Besides, even if we consider the hypothesis that the Turkish authorities might have organized the massacre, they had largely failed; the outcome was exactly opposite to their aims. In the same vein, Najaryan and Natanian only reluctantly suggested that the

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<sup>123</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” Topuzyan *Siriayi ev Libanani*; Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune Siriayi ev Libanani Azgayin-Azatagrakan Sharjumnerin* (Yerevan 1968).

<sup>124</sup> Margaryan, *Hayotc Tceghaspanutyun*; Margaryan, “Hay Taragimere,” 146-167.

<sup>125</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 217.

<sup>126</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 166-167.

<sup>127</sup> Margaryan, *Hayotc Tceghaspanutyun*, Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan.”

<sup>128</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 142.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Longrigg, *Syria*, 92. It was denied by Topuzyan, although the latter still saw a connection between the incident and the Armenian migration to Cilicia that was badly regarded by Turkey, Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakc.*, 216-217.

Syrians could have organized it since Syria claimed Cilicia.<sup>131</sup> Although the Syrians claimed Cilicia for the Syrian state, it seemed that the Alepines, at least, were not particularly disturbed by an Armenian contingent in Cilicia. On the contrary, weeks after the massacre, they were urging the Armenians of Aleppo to leave for Cilicia as soon as possible.

For both Topuzyan and Najaryan, apart from the Kemalist movement, the blame fell on the two imperial powers, who sought “to discredit Faysal’s government and impede friendly Armenian-Syrian relations.”<sup>132</sup> Such accounts are typical of the communist-era historiography that one-sidedly depicts Armenian-Arab relations as positive, blaming the misunderstandings on other agents, usually external players.

The most recent research on this period has largely adopted the conclusions of previous scholars that “despite Faysal’s pro-Armenian policy, small tensions were present, too, which, nevertheless, did not influence overall friendly Armenian-Arab relations.”<sup>133</sup> These works fail to see the connection between Pichon’s speech, the widespread rescue movement, and the massacre. It is also noteworthy that later rescue operations, mostly led by Karen Jeppe in the 1920s, abandoned previous strong-arm tactics in favor of much softer ones. Jeppe explained, in 1922, that rescue by force in the current situation – with Syria under an unpopular French mandate, factional fighting, and limited resources “would risk opening up an ‘Armenian question’ in Syria.”<sup>134</sup> Mikayel Natanian, one of the two Armenian members of the investigative commission, confirmed later that the protest on that tragic day was, indeed, directed against Pichon’s speech, and not at the Armenians.<sup>135</sup>

In sharp contrast to these accounts, two Arabic language major sources try to attribute the gathering of the mob to aspects of daily Armenian-Arab relations. Kamil Al-Ghazzi’s account deserves special attention for several reasons. First of all, Ghazzi was an Alepine; he was living in Aleppo when the incident took place and lost his job because of it after 30 years of state service.<sup>136</sup> His history of Aleppo, published in three volumes in 1926, gives an extensive

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<sup>131</sup> The “*Ahd*” followers had decided in their Damascus congress of 1915 that the frontiers of their homeland were the Taurus mountains. The Syrian general assembly of July 2, 1919, had also officially recognized it. Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 149.

<sup>132</sup> Najaryan, “Hay-Arabakan,” 155-156, 162; Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 219.

<sup>133</sup> Margaryan, *Hayots Tceghaspanutyun*.

<sup>134</sup> Karen Jeppe, “Account of the situation of the Armenians in Syria and of my work amongst them from the 1<sup>st</sup> of May until the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1922,” August 24, 1922, ALON 12/30066/4631 in “Marks Hard to Rrase,” 100.

<sup>135</sup> Natanian, “Surio Kharnakutyunnere ev Hayere” [Syrian Chaos and Armenians], *Arev* October 31, 1925, 2. Similar account is provided by Hovannisian, who situates the speech in the wider geopolitical context for struggle for Syria and Cilicia, see Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia, the First Year, 1918-1919*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 1: 321.

<sup>136</sup> He was an Ottomanist and a permanent feature in the literary life of Aleppo since the late 19th century. He served on the staff of the provincial *Firat* paper, publications of provinces yearbooks. Although he was not held

account of the event titled “The Armenian Incident, Known by The Name, the Civil Disturbances of 28 February 1919.” In these 15 pages, he first described the hospitable attitude of the Syrians towards the Armenians; then, he put the entire blame on the Armenians by identifying six main factors. The first five were: Armenians serving in the French army and firing rifles freely on some compatriots (Beirut incident), Armenian legionnaires mistreating the Arab soldiers and travelers, Armenian buyers cheating the Arab sellers, and occasionally stealing as well as making the Syrians trade in Egyptian money. He provided examples for each point to prove his argument. However, in his account, the 6th reason was primarily responsible for the gathering of the mob, which he covered in several pages. Armenians, escorted by the French and British armies and local police, entered the houses of the Muslims and claimed Armenian women and children.<sup>137</sup>

He then described the scenes in which these claimed women and children were forcibly removed; sometimes, even Muslim children were claimed.<sup>138</sup> All these actions were illegal and harmed the relations between the communities. He concluded by stating that, as a prelude to the mob, a stolen cow had been sold at the Friday market by an Armenian.<sup>139</sup> The description of the prelude is identical to the events at another mob against the Armenian refugees six years later, in Damascus.<sup>140</sup> Khazzi also made sure to mention that not all the Alepines had participated in the mob, many had also sheltered Armenians in their houses and saved their lives. He was also bitter about the punishments that had followed; 10 notables had been arrested, along with hundreds of “troublemakers,” many were executed, jailed, or exiled.<sup>141</sup>

The second account by Muhamed Kurd Ali, an influential statesman and the editor of *Al-Muktabas* in his *Khitat al-Sham*, under the title “Armenians and Their Attack on The Arabs,” is almost identical to Khazzi’s.<sup>142</sup> Among the primary causes he also pointed to the Beirut incident, train inspections, and the rescue mission as the prelude but referred to a stolen donkey instead of a cow.<sup>143</sup>

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responsible personally, nevertheless, Damascus authorities had taken the opportunity to remove him and other local opponents of Faysal’s rule, see in Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 200-201.

<sup>137</sup> Kamil al-Ghazzi, *Nahr al-dhahab*, 3: 718-123; Wathenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 200-207.

<sup>138</sup> These “Muslim children” had been Armenian children a few years ago. In fact, the widespread motto of the time was “Once a Muslim, always a Muslim,” to which Armenians had responded by the opposite “Once an Armenian, always Armenian.” For a similar situation elsewhere in Turkey proper see Ugur Ümit Üngör, “Orphans, Converts and Prostitutes: Social Consequences of War and Persecution in the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1923,” *War in History*, 19:2, (2012), 173-192, 179.

<sup>139</sup> Kmail Al-Khazzi, *Nahr al-dhahab* vol. 3:727-728.

<sup>140</sup> For details on the Syrian Revolt, see Part III of this dissertation.

<sup>141</sup> Kmail Al-Khazzi, *Nahr al-dhahab* 3:727-728.

<sup>142</sup> Muhamed Kurd Ali, *Khitat al-Sham* [The Topography of Damascus] (Damascus: al- Matba'a al- Haditha, 1925), 3:163-165.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

It is noteworthy that both authors mention the Beirut incident along with the Aleppo one. Watenpaugh suggests that the unusual sight of an armed Christian who not only had the right to bear a firearm (unthinkable in Ottoman times) but actually used it frightened them. Veldkamp agreed; he explained that Aleppo's Muslim population realized that the Ottoman-era hierarchy of religious groups had been overthrown.<sup>144</sup>

Among the early accounts, there is another that stands out in particular. It is the French-language account of an unnamed eyewitness. Although unnamed, we know that it was penned by David bey, an influential Henchak member, who wrote from a French perspective. Although the author mentioned the rescue operation as well as Pichon's speech and the demonstration against the speech, he made all these factors secondary.<sup>145</sup> Instead, he asserted that Armenian-Arab relations were quite hostile, that the Armenians were disturbed for minor reasons, and that there was anti-Armenian propaganda among the Syrians, especially when the latter had learned that Cilicia was claimed by the Armenians.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, he insisted that all the Christians in Aleppo were pro-French and anti-Faysal and that the local government was filled up with ex-officers of the Turkish army, all of whom were criminals. He also stated that no Christian had attended the reception hosted by Faysal in Aleppo<sup>147</sup> and that Kemalists had spread exaggerated rumors about the ill-treatment of the Muslims in the hands of the Armenian legionaries from the moment Armenian soldiers had entered Adana.<sup>148</sup>

It is striking how most of David bey's arguments have been taken up by several Armenian and Western historical accounts to claim a continuous hostile Syrian attitude toward the Armenians, anti-Armenian propaganda, a pro-French attitude on behalf of all the Christians, and a French-Armenian alliance. More recently, Joel Veldkamp has made the Aleppo events central to his research, based on rich primary and secondary sources, and claimed that it served as a defining moment for the Armenian experience in Aleppo throughout the interwar years.<sup>149</sup> While Veldkamp's work provides a valuable detailed account of the event, the work of the commission, and the post-event reactions, he, nevertheless, also wrongly insists on an Armenian-French alliance.<sup>150</sup>

Who were the mob organizers – the Kemalist forces, the Arab government, the French and British, or the ordinary Syrians? It is without a doubt that the local branch of *Al-Arab* was

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<sup>144</sup> The same argument is suggested by Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 203; Veldkamp, "Politics of Aleppo's" 76.

<sup>145</sup> *Les massacres d'Alep*, 10-11, 17-18.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

<sup>147</sup> *Les massacres d'Alep*, Joel Veldkamp, "Politics of Aleppo's."

<sup>148</sup> *Les massacres d'Alep*, 8-9.

<sup>149</sup> Joel Veldkamp, "Politics of Aleppo's," 75.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, 77, 78, 79, 90.

able to mobilize a large and diverse mass of people, thanks to its authority, connections, and innovative techniques. Having militias involved inevitably gave the impression that the Arab government was behind it, even if it was not. It is also incontrovertible that diverse groups of Syrians (soldiers, merchants, journalists, Bedouin, and many ordinary citizens) in northern Syria and Aleppo, in particular, had good reason to protest and rise against the Armenians. Pichon's speech had been the spark, indicating that the Armenians were to blame for the misfortunes of the Syrians. The imposed foreign rule, the Egyptian pound, the presence of a large number of "foreigners" in their local administrations, and the removal of additional working hands from their households; all of these were valid reasons for opposing the Armenians, whom Pichon had presented as the only French "clients" in Syria.

The Aleppo incident is important since it has played a critical role in presenting Syrian-Armenian and Armenian-French relations in ways that are still dominant until today; a hostile Muslim Syrian attitude towards the incoming Christian Armenian refugees, who were allied with the French colonial power. This perceived alliance (real or imaginary) between the Armenian refugees and the French was an easy and readily available explanation for all the incidents (major or minor) involving any violence against the Armenian refugees. The latter were being punished for having allied with the colonial power and enjoyed all kinds of privileges at the expense of the Syrians. The representation of both incidents (Beirut and Aleppo) promoted by the French in the press is equally important, for it would lay a pattern that would be used systematically throughout the entire mandate period, which we shall aim to document in the pages of this dissertation.

## **Chapter II: The Cilicia settlement and its impact on the Armenian-French relations**

This chapter focuses briefly on France's Cilician adventure, from claiming and obtaining it to abandoning it, and explores its impact on Armenian-French relations. The episode is relatively well studied from different perspectives.<sup>151</sup> The aim of this chapter is to show the decline in

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<sup>151</sup> There is extensive literature on the French experience in Cilicia. The Armenian settlement experience has been studied too, see for example, Benjamin Thomas White, "A Grudging Rescue: France, the Armenians of Cilicia, and the History of Humanitarian Evacuations," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, Vol. 10:1 (2019), 1-27; Vahram Shemmajian, "The Repatriation of Armenian Refugees from the Arab Middle East, 1918-1920" in *Armenian Cilicia*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian and Simon Payaslian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Press, 2008), 419-456; Garabet K. Moumdjian, "Cilicia under French Administration: Armenian Aspirations, Turkish Resistance, and French Strategems," in *Armenian Cilicia*, 457-494; Richard Hovannisian, "The Postwar Contest for Cilicia and the 'Marsh Afair'" in *Armenian Cilicia*, 495-556; Vahé Tachjian, "The Cilician Armenians and French policy, 1919-1921," in *Armenian Cilicia*, 539-556; Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie: Aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak, 1919-*

Armenian-French relations, the mutual suspicion and mistrust between the two, and the shifting alliances.

### **Cilicia – Armenian, Syrian, French or Turkish?**

Cilicia was the land where Armenian (British and American) and French interests clashed in the aftermath of WWI. The Armenians demanded that it should be attached to Armenia under the American mandate, while the French demanded that it be joined to Syria and that both should be under their mandate. In fact, France claimed Cilicia to be attached to Syria, considering her position to be definitely secured there considering its long-standing economic, political, and cultural interests. France's economic interests, in particular, had gradually increased since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the eve of WWI, France was, by far, the largest investor in the Ottoman Empire, including Syria, in the form of economic concessions and loans.<sup>152</sup>

French firms were in control of 60.31% (2,454,417,377 francs) of the Ottoman Public Debt.<sup>153</sup> Major investments were made in sectors such as banks (37.77%), railways (46%), ports (67.97%), roads, water (88.65%), mines (100%), gas, tobacco, and the silk trade.<sup>154</sup> Many of these were direct investments in Syria. For example, the Ottoman Bank, which was fully controlled by the French and British, had branches in all major Syrian cities, including Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, Homs, and Tripoli.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, the branch of Crédit Lyonnais in Beirut served as a direct link between the silk industry of Mount Lebanon and silk factories in Lyons.<sup>156</sup> The port of Beirut, the paved road between Beirut and Damascus, and the Beirut-Damascus-Hawran railway line were all constructed and operated by French firms.<sup>157</sup> The

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1933 (Paris: Karthala 2004); Claude Mutafian, "La France en Cilicie: Histoire d'un échec, 1919-1939" in *Les temps modernes: Arménie-diaspora, mémoire et modernité*, ed. Jean Paul Sartre, et al. (1988), N:504-506, 90-108.

<sup>152</sup> Jacques Thobie, *Intérêts et impérialisme français dans l'Empire Ottoman, 1895-1914* (Paris, 1977).

<sup>153</sup> For comparison, at the same time Great Britain controlled only 14,19% (577,499,281 francs) and Germany 21,31% (867.583.506). *L'Asie française*, N :175, (février-juillet, 1919), 180, cited in R. G. Sahakyan, *Türk-Fransiakan Haraberutyunnere ev Kilikian, 1919-1921* [Turkish-French Relations and Cilicia, 1919-1921] (Yerevan, 1970), 58.

<sup>154</sup> Gonton-Biron, *Comment la France s'est installée en Syrie (1918-1919)* (Pranava Books, India, undated), 3; Sahakyan, *Türk-Fransiakan*, 59-60.

<sup>155</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 31.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> On the connection between Lyon and the silk manufacturers, see Dominique Chevallier, "Lyon et la Syrie en 1919 : les bases d'une intervention," *Revue historique* No. 24 (1960), 275-320 ; John F. Laffey, "Roots of French Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Lyon," *French Historical Studies* 6 :1 (1969), 78-92; Michel Seurat, "Le rôle de Lyon dans l'installation du mandat français en Syrie : Intérêts économiques et culturels, luttes d'opinion (1915-1925)," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 31 (1979), 129-165.



French also controlled 788 km of railway or 40% of all the railways in Syria,<sup>158</sup> including the Hejaz and Deraa-Haifa railways managed by the Sociétés Françaises.<sup>159</sup> Régie des Tabacs de l'Empire Ottoman, in its turn, controlled the tobacco business throughout the empire. Since Syria had a thriving tobacco industry, Régie had built tobacco processing factories in Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>160</sup> According to Simon Jackson, economic interests were not the only reasons behind France's determination to secure her position in Syria and Lebanon. The colonial lobby headed by *Comité d'Asie Française* and other officials also promoted the policy.<sup>161</sup>

French investors were particularly interested in a small piece of land known as Cilicia located on the north-eastern coast of the Mediterranean and in the north of Syria. Cilicia, in addition to its strategic location and mild climate, contained 2,600,000 ha of fertile land.<sup>162</sup> The region, in particular, had considerable potential for the cultivation of cotton, cereals, tobacco, and olives.<sup>163</sup> Of these, cotton was considered the most important item, and it was believed that Cilicia would be able to meet all France's requirements for cotton.<sup>164</sup> We shall see later how the French interests shifted from Cilicia (after having it ceded to Turkey) to the Syrian Jazira.

At the beginning of January 1919, ahead of the Peace Conference, the Marseille Chamber of Commerce organized an important "Congress for Syria" to which Armenian delegates were invited.<sup>165</sup> Armenian historian Basmajian, who was one of the invitees, sent a warning letter to the organizers, arguing that claiming Cilicia for the Syrians risked jeopardizing the relations of the two future neighboring countries and that the Armenians had more rights to claim Cilicia for themselves than the Syrians did.<sup>166</sup> The Armenian official memorandum submitted to the Paris Peace Conference also termed the Syrian demand for Cilicia preposterous since, before the war, there were only 20,000 Arabs there in comparison to thousands of Armenians... "Cilicia was the lungs of Armenia, without which it would be confined in the

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<sup>158</sup> R. G. Sahakyan, *Turk-Fransiakan*, 71.

<sup>159</sup> Gontant-Biron, *Comment la France*, 8.

<sup>160</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French*, 32.

<sup>161</sup> Simon Jackson, "Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915–1939," (PhD diss., New York University, 2009), 39–197; Jackson, "'What is Syria Worth?' The Huvelin Mission, Economic Expertise and the French Project in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1918-1922," *Monde(s)* 2:4 (2013), 83–103.

<sup>162</sup> Sahakyan, *Turk-Fransiakan*, 61.

<sup>163</sup> Georges Désbons, "L'avenir Economique de la France dans la Bassin Méditerranéen Oriental," *Le monde industriel et commercial et agricole*, Serie N:1, 25 février 1920, cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 62.

<sup>164</sup> The prices of cotton grew by 121% between 1892 and 1913, parallel to the increasing prices in the USA and India. All the French efforts to start cotton production in other colonies (Cambodge and Afrique tropicale) required more time and investments. Maurice Honoré, "Les droits et les intérêts de la France Orient," *La Nouvelle Revue*, 15 Juin 1920, 289-303, 292. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k112592c/f295.item> (accessed on February 18 2021); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A New History of Global Capitalism* (London 2015), 344-348.

<sup>165</sup> K. J. Basmadjian, "Le congrès français de la Syrie," *La voix d'Arménie*, (Paris 1919), N: 25-26, 51.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

mountains... This disagreement notwithstanding, the bonds of friendship and solidarity between the Armenians and the Syrians had been cemented by equal sufferings... and it was the wish of the Armenians to see a strong Syrian neighbor.”<sup>167</sup> The memorandum also pointed out that Faysal, did not claim Cilicia either in his memorandum of January 29 (1919) or at his personal appearance on February 6 (1919). Instead, he put the upper boundary of his claimed lands along a line south of Alexandretta-Diyarbakir.<sup>168</sup>

At this point, the Armenian elite did not fully understand that their people had become the unfortunate victims of the competition between the Allied forces. Unsurprisingly, the French high officials more than once expressed their dissatisfaction with the Armenian demands of Cilicia and their refusal to accept the French mandate. For example, when a French deputy declared in the parliament that France had rights over the Armenians,<sup>169</sup> it created further mistrust in already tense relations. A few days earlier, another declaration by Brémont, the French governor of Cilicia, caused anger in wider Armenian circles. He had reportedly declared that “Turkey was an old friend... France was a Muslim country; it had thousands of Muslim subjects, and that (sic) the Muslim population had nothing to worry about.”<sup>170</sup> Then, Jean Gout, the head of the Eastern department of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had reportedly met the Armenian delegation and raised the issue.<sup>171</sup> For some reason, the Armenian delegation largely ignored such warnings. The French authorities started pressurizing them with the help of the media. On February 15, 1919, J. Herbette, the chief editor of *Le Temps*, who was also the unofficial spokesperson of the Quai d’Orsay, met with Aharonyan, the head of the Armenian Republic Delegation (Hayastani Hanrapetutyun Arakelutyun, hereafter, HHA) to inquire about the Armenian reasons for demanding Cilicia. He made clear once again French interests by explicitly mentioning that France was against the Armenian demands... “having its own interests for centuries there... Cilicia, therefore, must be with Syria, without which Syria could not survive...”<sup>172</sup> Aharonyan did not hide his astonishment, he had just discovered that the Armenian adversary in Cilicia was not Syria, as previously thought, but France. Herbette

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<sup>167</sup> Boghos Nubar and Avertis Aharonyan, “The Armenian question before the Peace Congress,” Memorandum in English and French (Boston 1919), 6-7.

<sup>168</sup> Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, 1: 279.

<sup>169</sup> S. Kepelian, “Vorn e Irakanutyune?” [What is the Reality?], *Hay Dzayn*, February 21, 1919, 1.

<sup>170</sup> Jam-ran, “Kilikian Lurer” [News from Cilicia], *Hay Dzayn* February 16, 1919, 2. “France is the forth with the biggest number of Muslim subjects, after the British (92 million), Holland (36 million), China (30 million). France has more Muslim subjects (23 million) than Russia (19,1 million), and even Turkey (14,6 million).” René Puaux, *La question d’Orient devant le parlement (Séance du 28 octobre 1922)* (Paris, 1922), 17-18, cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-Fransiakan*, 66.

<sup>171</sup> A. Terzibashian, *Nubar* (in Armenian) (Paris: Der Agopian, 1939), 255.

<sup>172</sup> Avetis Aharonyan, *Sardarapatitc Minchev Sever ev Losan, Kaghakan Oragir* [From Sardarabat to Sever and Lausanne: My Political Memories] (Boston: Hayrenik, 1943), 9.

concluded the interview by saying, “It is too bad, that Armenia has imperialistic intentions even before being officially formed.”<sup>173</sup> *Le Temps* presented the interview and the Armenian demands in a cynical article a few days later, titled “The Armenian Empire.”<sup>174</sup> Obviously, what disturbed France was not the Armenian claim over Cilicia but their insistence on the American mandate,<sup>175</sup> and also the intensive American efforts in the form of various inquiry commissions that were sent to the region one after another.<sup>176</sup> There is evidence that the speech of the French Foreign Minister Pichon in the French Parliament in December 1918, which would spark anti-Armenian sentiments in Aleppo and Adana, was intended to pressure Armenia to drop her claims “to this fertile and strategic region.”<sup>177</sup>

Two incidents indicated that French influence in Cilicia was endangered. On March 7, 1919, during a private consultation between Clemenceau (French), Lloyd George (British), and Colonel House (USA) over the mandates’ distribution, George confirmed that France would have the mandate over Syria. When Clemenceau added “and Cilicia,” British and American representatives rejected the demand by saying, “Cilicia comprised the richest parts of the projected state of Armenia, and the United States might take a mandate for it.”<sup>178</sup> A few days later, during the session of March 20, the topic was hotly debated again, and the session ended with President Wilson suggesting that Cilicia was to be given to Armenia, “while for the dispute over Syria, an inter-Allied commission ought to be sent there.”<sup>179</sup> Thus, it turned out that even the French claims over Syria were in doubt. Clemenceau then insisted that the King-Crane Commission, which was to find out which mandatory power the Syrians would prefer, should not advise on Syria but Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Armenia as well.

The famous publicist Robert de Caix, who had been appointed a secretary of the French High Commissioner in Beirut and was tasked with negotiating a deal with Faysal, suggested a solution. First, he presented the British and American claims over Cilicia as the next intrigue after the removal of France from Mosul and Palestine, then suggested that in order to prevent

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<sup>173</sup> The whole interview is cited in *ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>174</sup> Gabriel Lazian, *Hayastane ev Hay Date* [Armenia and the Armenian cause] (Cairo: Nor Astegh 1946), 258; Terzibashian, *Nubar*, 262.

<sup>175</sup> National Archives and Record Administration (hereafter NARA), Confidential files, vol. 466, Consular Posts Beirut, Paul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Beirut, January 26, 1926, “Political situation in Syria,” 3-5.

<sup>176</sup> In July 1919 U.S. Colonel William Haskell was appointed as a High Commissioner of Armenia representing a joint American, French, British and Italian mission. The French representative was the famous captain Poidebard. Gayane Makhmourian, *Armenia in Documents of the U.S. Department of State 1917-1920* (Yerevan, 2020).

<sup>177</sup> TNA, Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/3658, 47515/47516/512/58, in Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, 1: 321.

<sup>178</sup> David Lloyd George, *Memoirs of the Peace Conference* (New Haven, 1939), 1:189-190, cited in Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, 317.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

it, Cilicia should be Turkish, not Armenian.<sup>180</sup> This proposition appealed to the listeners in Paris and soon became the official French policy in Cilicia.

When in April-May 1919, Italian troops struck out along the southern coastline of Asia Minor and Greek forces landed in Smyrna on May 15, 1919, France felt she was about to lose her foothold in the region.<sup>181</sup> French fears were further aggravated when on May 21, 1919 Lloyd George declared that “the Italians and French should, in the best interests of world peace, be turned away from Anatolia (Cilicia included)”.<sup>182</sup>

On May 30, 1920, it was de Caix who traveled to Samsun to broker a ceasefire with Mustafa Kemal, who led the Turkish liberation movement and was to soon become the founder of the modern Turkish Republic earning the title Atatürk. The agreement was to be kept secret from the Armenians.<sup>183</sup> In his letter to Albert Kammerer, who was on the border delimitation commission for Armenia, de Caix highlighted the economic advantages of Northern Syria, which was the richest part of Syria and ought not to be attached to the Damascus government “...shall France ensure her position there, reaching until north to Aintab, Euphrates River to the place where it flowed to the direction of Orontes and Mardin, Cilicia could be given away to Turkey.”<sup>184</sup> De Caix, thus, was instrumental not only in carving out the administrative divisions in Syria during the early 1920s and laying the ground for French mandatory politics, but he was also a key figure behind the French policies in Cilicia and vis-à-vis the Armenians.

In the meantime, several inquiry commissions were sent to the former Ottoman territories. The King-Crane Commission advised a single American mandate from Alexandretta to the Caucasus, suggesting that Armenian territorial claims were exaggerated and that Cilicia should be excluded from them.<sup>185</sup> In September 1919, another independent commission arrived in the Republic of Armenia and Turkish territories, headed by General Harbord. The fact that a copy

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<sup>180</sup> Letter from Robert de Caix to Philippe Berthelot, Paris, 12 avril 1919, cited in Gérard D. Khury, *Une tutelle coloniale : le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban, écrits politiques de Robert de Caix* (Belin, 2006), 159.

<sup>181</sup> Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, 1: 321-322.

<sup>182</sup> Paris Peace Conference, V, 756-758, 770-771, cited in *ibid*, 328.

<sup>183</sup> Lettre de R. de Caix à Son Excellence Mustapha Kemal Pacha: Président de l'assemblée nationale suprême, gouvernement national d'Angora, cited in D. Khury, *Une tutelle*, 245-247. This letter is not dated, because Gourand was officially nominated High Commissioner on October 8, 1919, Khury has assumed that de Caix wrote this letter in May 1920 (instead of 1919). However, based on the recent research we know that Gourand was involved before his official appointment, thus this letter as well as Caix's meeting with Kemal might have well happened in May 1919. See MAE, Fonds Robert de Caix, PA-AP 353, letter du 12 avril 1919 à Philippe Berthelot. More on the French fears that the British sought to drive the French out from the Middle East see, MAE, PA, AP 399, C87-D1, note de Jesan Goût (chef du service français de la Société des Nations au Quai d'Orsay) pour Clemenceau, destinée à Lloyd George, 4 mai 1919. Both sources are cited in Julie d'Andurain, “Un proconsulat en trompe-l'oeil. Le général Henri Gouraud en Syrie, 1919-1923,” *Revue Historique*, N : 685 (2018), 99-122, 108.

<sup>184</sup> De Robert de Caix à Albert Kammerer, Beirut, 31 mars 1920, cited in Khoury, *Une tutelle*, 225. See also Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 110-113.

<sup>185</sup> David Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 158.

of the findings of the latter commission can be found in the diplomatic archives in Paris is telling. Immediately after the departure of this commission, a French envoy arrived in Yerevan. He was Loris Melikian, an Armenian, former active ARF member, and a close friend of Clemenceau. Melikian, who could not speak Armenian, had declared after his arrival that he was there to familiarize himself with the people, the state structure, the opportunities, and the conditions.<sup>186</sup> It is rather strange that being an ARF member (or former?) he did not reveal the real intentions of his visit to his fellow party members who ruled the country.<sup>187</sup>

The confidential American reports confirmed the intensified, secret British efforts for a British or, if that was not possible, American mandate over Syria.<sup>188</sup> Against this backdrop, when the French faced the danger of losing their foothold in the entire region, they turned towards Kemal in an attempt to secure an agreement with Turkey. This step was needed to maintain former French dominance and recover the pre-War French economic and financial investments. The French pro-Turkish policy, however, did not leave room for a liberated Armenia. An article published in *Le Figaro* in September 1919 is telling: “The only rational policy is to leave Anatolia to the Turks, to bury the illusion of a ‘Great Armenia’ in exchange for maintaining the French investments and schools.”<sup>189</sup>

For some reason, the Armenian political elite was sure they would obtain the American mandate. On April 17, 1919, an Armenian delegation had a meeting with the American President Wilson, during which the latter had declared that “if the USA shall ever agree to take any mandate, it will be for Armenia.”<sup>190</sup> Little did they know that the proposal would be rejected by the U.S. Senate less than a month later.<sup>191</sup> Meanwhile, the Peace Conference of Paris closed in January 1920 without any plans for the U.S. to take part in the postwar settlements of the Middle East.

However, the question of the Armenian homeland and territorial claims remained unsolved. In January 1920, Philippe Berthelot, the political affairs director at the French Foreign Ministry, told the twin Armenian delegations to concentrate their efforts on Anatolia –

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<sup>186</sup> Vahan Papazian, *Im Husheres* [My Memories] (Cairo: Husaber, 1957), 3:76.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> “I was considerably impressed at that time by the fact that the British political officers in Syria were conducting a campaign of propaganda against the French. It seemed that their object in so doing was to create a situation that would compel the League of Nations to offer the mandate to England. (In view of her engagements with France, England could not seek it openly). If failed, to influence the offering of the mandate to the United States.” NARA, Confidential files, 466, Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, January 26, 1926, “Political situation in Syria,” 3-4.

<sup>189</sup> Raymond Recouly, “La conférence et l’Orient,” *Le Figaro* (Paris), Septembre 23, 1919), 1.

<sup>190</sup> Terzibashyan, *Nubar*, 259; Lazian, *Armenia*, 258.; Aharonyan, From *Sardarapat*, 18.

<sup>191</sup> More details on how and why it was rejected, see in Marc Malkasian, “The Disintegration of the Armenian Cause in the United States, 1918-1927,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, (1984), vol. 16:3, 349-365.

Van, Bitlis, Mush, and some parts of Erzurum – and forget about Cilicia.<sup>192</sup> It seemed that the Armenians agreed. Nevertheless, the next month, when the settlement issue was being discussed in London, Nubar, the head of the DNA still insisted on Cilicia, to the great surprise of Aharonyan. Nubar argued that he had been promised Armenian autonomy.<sup>193</sup> Later, Aharonyan acknowledged that, indeed, Cilicia had been the touchstone.<sup>194</sup> Needless to say, neither the debate over Cilicia nor Armenian “national home” ended here, as we shall see it in later chapters.

The year 1920 was decisive for the Armenians and Syrians alike. Across the Middle East, the situation had changed rapidly. The French had intensified direct talks with Kemal; in Syria, Faysal was crowned King in March 1920, and the country was declared independent. This would do little to help the Syrians, and the mandate for Syria and Lebanon was awarded to France in April 1920. In July 1920, Faysal was defeated, and French rule was established in Syria.<sup>195</sup> Things were also dramatic for the Armenians: a promising peace treaty was signed in Sèvres in August 1920, and the map of Armenia was drawn up by none other than president Wilson, promising an independent and United Armenia. Nevertheless, this agreement remained only on paper in the face of the Turkish military campaign against the young Armenian Republic, which would then come under Bolshevik rule.

Both the Armenians and the Syrians felt defeated, demoralized, and cheated; neither community had managed to fulfill their national aspirations. Armenian-French relations were at a low point, tarnished by a mutual distrust that would only grow, as we shall observe later. The next chapter aims to shed light on the assurances and promises given to Nubar in London, which will help explain why the Armenian delegations insisted on Cilicia. Through this insistence, they had inadvertently fallen victim to the competition among the Allied forces, who could not agree on how to partition the former Ottoman territories.

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<sup>192</sup> Aharonyan, From *Sardarapat*, 145. Rohan Butler and J. P.-T. Bury, *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, volume VII, 280-281.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Avetis Aharonyan’s letter to the Armenian prime Minister Alexander Khatisyan, 19 March 1920, London, in the State Archives of the Republic of Armenia (thereafter, HAA), fond 200, list 1, file 290, 68-85; cited in Gayane Makhmouryan, “Avetis Aharonyan’s letters of March 19, 23, 1920, from London,” in *Banber Hayastani Archivneri*, N: 2 (2009), 109-122, 114.

<sup>195</sup> More on this, see Elizabeth F. Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (UK: Grove Press, 2020).

## Légion d'Orient

On October 24, 1916, Poghos Nubar Pasha, the head of the DNA in Paris (1912–1924) and the founder and first president of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU)(1907–1928), was summoned to the French embassy in London.<sup>196</sup> There, the prominent French and British diplomats, Georges Picot and Mark Sykes shared with him their plans to divide the Ottoman Empire. According to this plan, the Armenian-populated vilayets would come under the protection of two Allied forces: Van, Erzurum, Bitlis, Dersim, and Trabizon would be under Russian control, while Cilicia, Sivas, Kharput, and Diyarbekir would be under the French.<sup>197</sup> The diplomats hinted to Nubar that the Armenians had greater chances of forging autonomy under French control than under the Russians.<sup>198</sup> During the same meeting it was also decided to form an Armenian volunteer force to fight alongside the Allies for the liberation of their own homeland, thus contributing to the Allied victory on the one hand and earning the right to autonomy on the other. The sides also agreed that the Armenian volunteers could fight in Syria and Smyrna without any pretensions to these lands as homelands.<sup>199</sup> This is how the idea of forming the Légion d'Orient was born.<sup>200</sup> Nubar, however, only began formal attempts to recruit volunteers for the Légion once he was given direct and explicit assurances from Picot that France would grant autonomy to Cilicia and three other former Armenian provinces that were to come under French control.<sup>201</sup> If the French sought to use the Légion for their own purposes, so did the Armenians. Nubar had certainly hoped that the Légion would serve as a first step toward the creation of an autonomous Armenia within the Ottoman Empire while, for the British and French, it meant a colonizing tool for their imperial policies in the Middle East.<sup>202</sup> In 1917, a united “National Union” was formed in Cairo comprising the representatives of three main Armenian political parties, Henschak, ARF, and Ramkavar, which was sent to the

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<sup>196</sup> Poghos Nubar was the son of Nubar Pasha, an influential statesman, who had served as the finance and prime-minister of Egypt. Arshak Chobanian, “Poghos Nubar Pashayi Hayrenasirakan Gortsuneutyune,” *Paykar Handes Azgayin en Tentsekan* (Boston, September, 1931), 121-126.

<sup>197</sup> HAA, fond 57, list 5, file 19, 68; Vatche Ghazarian, *Boghos Nubar's Papers and the Armenian Question 1915-1918* (Mayreni Pub, first edition, 1997), 372-374; Andrekos Varnava, “French and British Post-war Imperial Agendas and Forging an Armenian Homeland after the Genocide: The formation of the Legion d'Orient in October 1916,” in *The Historical Journal* vol. 57:4 (2014), 957-1025, 998.

<sup>198</sup> Archives of Délégation Nationale Arménienne de Paris (hereafter DNA), Boghos Nubar, “Note on the Circumstances and Conditions under which the Légion d'Orient was Created in 1916,” 9 décembre 1920.

<sup>199</sup> Papazian, *Im Hushers*, 3:47-48.

<sup>200</sup> Légion d'Orient was formed with the following conditions: To have Armenians' own contribution in the liberation of their homeland in line with their national aspirations; The Armenian Légionnaires would only fight against the Ottoman Empire and only on the soil of their homeland; The Armenian Légion would constitute the future nucleus of the Armenian army in the future Armenian state. Boghos Nubar, “Note on the circumstances and conditions under which the Légion d'Orient was created in 1916,” “Légion d'Orient.”

<sup>201</sup> Bloxham, *The Great Game*, 141.

<sup>202</sup> Susan Pattie, *The Armenian Legionnaires: Sacrifice and Betrayal in World War I* (Lon: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 56.

USA to recruit Armenian volunteers. It was generally believed that the Légion was to become the nucleus of the future Armenian army.<sup>203</sup>

After that, statements made by high-level French officials continued to assure the Armenian elite that Armenian aspirations were to be satisfied.<sup>204</sup> Picot himself carried the official title of the French High Commissioner in Syria and Armenia, while Clemenceau had been an advocate for the Armenian cause before becoming prime minister.<sup>205</sup> As a result, there were no doubts among the Armenians that French intentions were sincere and serious.

By mid-1918, the Légion, which was meant to be an auxiliary force commanded by French officers, included 5500 soldiers, out of which 400 were Syrians, and the rest were Armenians.<sup>206</sup> It is noteworthy that British authorities, probably keen to maintain their own pre-eminent influence with the Arab insurgents, had prohibited the recruitment of the Sunni Arabs.<sup>207</sup> This explains why it continued to be predominantly Armenian.

Together with the Allies, the Légion participated successfully in the battles in Palestine, arriving in Aleppo in mid-October 1918, just a week ahead of the Armistice. Since France did not have enough military forces, the Légion was tasked with taking control of Cilicia. Moreover, it was further reinforced by recruits from Beirut and Damascus from the ranks of Ottoman prisoners of war. These newcomers not only swelled the numbers of legionnaires but also contributed to greater indiscipline in the force.<sup>208</sup> Soon after, in December 1918, the Légion was renamed the “Armenian Légion,”<sup>209</sup> before being partially dissolved in spring 1919 and totally in 1920 in the light of improved French-Turkish relations.

### **Settling Armenians, claiming Cilicia**

On February 1, 1919, General Brémont arrived in Adana as the French governor of Cilicia. Within days, on February 20, a directive was issued stating that Armenian refugees of the

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<sup>203</sup> Arsen Kitur, *Patmutyun S. D. Henchak Kusaktsutyun*, 1887-1962 [History of the Social Democrate Henchak Party, 1887-1962] (Beirut: Shirak 1962), 1:530.

<sup>204</sup> One such evidence is the letter of the French High Commissioner Picot to the Armenian catholicos Sahak II sent on February 5, 1918. In this letter Picot, after passing the greetings of president Raymond Poincaré and the foreign minister Georges Clemenceau, reconfirmed French determination to support the Armenians against the regime that had massacred them, archive Sahak II, file 103/2, N:7 cited in Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits Patmutyun Katoghikosoutyan Hayots Kilikio (1914-1972)* [The Contemporary History of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1914–1972] (Antelias, 1975), 77-78.

<sup>205</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:77.

<sup>206</sup> Sargis Poghosian, *Terkahay Spayi Me Oragire* [The Diary of an Ottoman Armenian Officer], (Paris, 1947), 2:133, Cited in Sahakian, *Turk-Fransiakan*, 116.

<sup>207</sup> N. E. Bou-Nacklie, “Les Troupes spéciales: religious and ethnic recruitment, 1916–1946,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25:4 (1993), 645-660, 647.

<sup>208</sup> Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game*, 151.

<sup>209</sup> Tigran Poyajian, *Armenian Legion* (Boston: Watertown, 1965), 174-177.



Middle East should be settled in Cilicia “when it is desirable” and that their properties ought to be “immediately restored.”<sup>210</sup> All the expenses were to be covered by the French authorities. This is how the French authorities embarked on organizing the mass emigration of the Armenian refugees of Syria, Lebanon, and neighboring areas into Cilicia. Two main departure centers were immediately established: Aleppo (by train to Adana) and Damascus (by train to Beirut and then by ship to Mersin). On June 2, 1919, as a response to the French settlement initiative, the DNA and HHA assigned Mihran Damadian to be their joint representative in Cilicia and Syria before the French authorities.<sup>211</sup>

By the end of 1919, Brémond had estimated that about 120,000 Armenians were resettled in Cilicia.<sup>212</sup> For most of these refugees, Cilicia was a homeland from which they had been driven by force. Byuzand Yeghiayan mentioned that even those who came originally from the internal regions gave preference to Cilicia.<sup>213</sup> They argued that their homes were far away and still under Turkish rule, while Cilicia was occupied by the Allied forces and, with its long coast and economic potential, promised a good future.<sup>214</sup> The enthusiasm did not last long.

Despite evidence that the Turkish population made efforts to give the incoming Armenians a warm welcome, provided them with food and bedding, and returned them their animals and goods, the arrival of the Armenians did not go smoothly.<sup>215</sup> On the one hand, the previous Ottoman administration was still intact, which meant that most of the perpetrators of the massacres and deportations remained unpunished. Indeed, some still held their high positions, and, therefore, many officials were biased towards the incoming Armenians.<sup>216</sup> The most notorious were the valis (governor) of Adana and Konia, who had declared in December 1918 that Armenian soldiers had arrived there to initiate massacres.<sup>217</sup> On the other hand, the Turkish population was armed.<sup>218</sup> A French source confirmed that these two valis had created

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<sup>210</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 8; see also Vahram Shemmassian, “The Repatriation of Armenian Refugees from the Arab Middle East, 1918-1920,” in *Armenian Cilicia*, ed., Richard Hovannisian and Simon Payaslian, (Costa Meza, California: Mazda Publishers, 2008); For the French Administration in Cilicia, see Garabet K. Moushjian “Cilicia under French Administration: Armenian Aspirations, Turkish Resistance, and French Strategies,” in *ibid*; Chris Gratien, “The Sick Mandate of Europe: Local and Global Humanitarianism in French Cilicia, 1918-1922,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association*, Vol. 3:1 (2016), 165-190.

<sup>211</sup> Nubar and Aharonian, file 66, N: 3, cited in Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 91-92.

<sup>212</sup> Edouard Brémond, *La Cilicie en 1919-1920* (Imprimerie nationale, 1921), 12.

<sup>213</sup> Refugees who returned to Cilicia were not only from Syria and Lebanon, rather from entire region. There were 20,000 from Iraq, 50,000 from Aleppo, 45,000 from Damascus, 5,000 from Istanbul, 6,000 from Lebanon, 8,000 from diverse other places, 50,000 from internal regions, in total about 184,000. Refugees who did not leave for Cilicia and stayed in Aleppo counted for about 23,500; see in Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 246.

<sup>214</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 71.

<sup>215</sup> Kitour, *Patmutyun Henchakian*, 542-543.

<sup>216</sup> HAA, fond 205, list 1, file 780, 69-70, Damadian’s letter to Zaven patriarch, undated.

<sup>217</sup> G. Gautherot, *La France en Syrie et en Cilicie* (Courbevoie Seine, 1920), 181.

<sup>218</sup> Reportedly about 25,000 weapons were sold there by the retreating Turkish soldiers *Cilicia*, March 19, 1919, cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 121.

gendarmes out of demobilized Ottoman soldiers.<sup>219</sup> Turkish villages were mobilized under the umbrellas of “Islamic unions” to defend their villages from the “Armenian bands.”<sup>220</sup> Therefore, all the French effort to disarm the local population was perceived as a clear signal for the perceived massacres.<sup>221</sup> An Armenian newspaper reported that religious leaders of Cilicia discouraged the Muslim population from handing over their arms.<sup>222</sup> Damadian also reported that the French calls to hand over arms were mainly responded to by the Christians.<sup>223</sup> This was the situation when Brémont declared his untimely decree (April 6, 1919) to restore stolen properties to the former Armenian owners within two months.<sup>224</sup> The announcement created tensions and bloody clashes.<sup>225</sup> Reflecting on these events, Efendieva, whose work has been considered rather pro-Turkish, observed that the French deliberately created tensions between the incoming Armenians and the local Turks in order to divert the latter’s attention from the colonizing French power.<sup>226</sup> Soon the French authorities started to discreetly arm Armenians as well as pro-Kemal forces under the pretext that there was a need for self-defense.<sup>227</sup> We shall see later how the same policy would be implemented in Syria during the Syrian Revolt (1925–1927). Obviously, this initiative did nothing to promote trust and cooperation between the communities. Instead, it contributed to the general atmosphere of extreme distrust and hatred. Soon, small and large-scale clashes became the norm. Moreover,

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<sup>219</sup> In 22 December they counted for 3,600 persons, see in Gautherot, *La France en Syrie*, 182.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>222</sup> *Hay Dzayn*, July 23, 1919, Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 120.

<sup>223</sup> HAA, fond 205, list 1, file 780, 71, cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 122.

<sup>224</sup> *Cilicia*, June 11, 1919 cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 122.

<sup>225</sup> *Cilicia*, June 13, 14, 17, 1919.

<sup>226</sup> H. Z. Efendieva, 81 cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 127.

<sup>227</sup> Pattie, cited testimony of one of the legionnaires, *The Armenian Legionnaires*, 288; Sarkis Kepelian, “Kilikan Hay Demker” [Armenian Actors from Cilicia], *Paykar Handes Azgayin, Grakan ev Tntesakan* (Boston), September 1931, 30- 39, 34. About Turks being armed by the French see Sarkis Torossian, *From Dardanelles to Palestine: A True Story of Five Battlefronts of Turkey and Her Allies and A Harem Romance* (Boston, MA, 1947). On accounts that retrospectively testify that France played Armenians and Turks off one against the other, see “In this connection [the French policy of playing one community against the other during the Syrian Revolt] we can recall their policy in Cilicia during the period, 1920-1922 when all their efforts were directed to cause intrigues and hatred between the Armenians and Turks. They were the cause for the most cruel massacre of the Armenians in that country, for during their occupation of that territory they armed the Armenians and caused them to persecute the Turks, but when they at last retreated from there at the time of Moustafa Kemal’s occupation the Armenians have undergone the most brutal atrocities ...”. NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465 (1-4), American consular service, Beirut, report memorandum, “Menace of a Civil War in Syria,” November 22, 1925, 1 (122). For a similar policy later implemented in Syria, see “Playing off one against the other is a dangerous method which may eventually prove to be a weapon sharpened against themselves. Their policy towards the Armenians ... tends to increase Muslim suspicion, as well as to intensify their hatred of the Armenian people.” NARA, RG84, Reel 5, “Armenian Settlement in Syria,” American Consulate General, Beirut, 26 February 1931, cited in Jordi Tejel, *Rethinking State and Border Formation*, 69. More study is, however, needed to document the claims that France armed both Armenians and Turks in Cilicia.

there was a schism among the legionnaires. Turkish notables created tension among the Algerian legionnaires and the Armenian ones on religious grounds. Algerian legionnaires increasingly sided with the Turks and against their Armenian colleagues. The same situation was widespread in Alexandretta, northern Syria, and Aleppo.<sup>228</sup> American archives and Sargis Torossian confirm this.<sup>229</sup>

Finally, efforts were made to present all types of crimes or banditry as the work of the Armenians, particularly the Légion soldiers, in order to discredit them.<sup>230</sup> As the French played the Armenian and Turkish elements against each other, it became clear that the shift in French policy to reconcile with Kemal had already taken place. In this context, efforts were now made to present the Armenians as the main obstacle to the achievement of French goals. The situation eventually became too much for the French officers to handle.<sup>231</sup>

Armenians in Cilicia, as elsewhere, were divided not only into religious groups but also political parties, complicating the situation even further. All three main parties were present, each trying to establish supremacy. The French authorities charged the ARF with working with the British intelligence service and being a “perfect instrument for spreading anti-French propaganda,” although they acknowledged that the vast majority of the Armenians were not politically active.<sup>232</sup> The Armenian National Union in Adana was composed of Ramkavars, ARF and neutral individuals. The Henschaks, for their part, controlled the Légion.<sup>233</sup>

Under the British-French agreement of September 15, 1919, the entire control of Cilicia was transferred from the British to the French.<sup>234</sup> On November 12, 1919, Kemal complained publicly against the French occupation.<sup>235</sup> When the French forces started to arrive in the major cities to replace the British forces, local discontent became widespread. The main complaint was against the presence of the Armenian soldiers. At this point, French authorities were convinced that any unrest could be avoided if Armenian legionnaires were withdrawn and

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<sup>228</sup> G. Gautherot, *La France en Syrie*, 134–189.

<sup>229</sup> American consul in Aleppo reported that “French policy in Cilicia was directed to cause intrigues and hatred between the Armenians and Turks. They were the main cause for the cruelest massacres of the Armenians there.” See in NARA, confidential files, N:465 (1 of 4), Report Memorandum, “Meance of a Civil War in Syria,” Damascus, 22 novembre 1925, 3; Torossian, *From Dardanelles*, 198.

<sup>230</sup> G. Gautherot, *La France en Syrie*, 182 ; de Général Hamelin, commandant le détachement français de Palestine Syrie à Monsieur le Général commandant le XXI Corps d’Armée, secret, Beirut, 28 décembre 1918, [http://www.eliecilicie.net/demobilisation\\_turque\\_1918.htm](http://www.eliecilicie.net/demobilisation_turque_1918.htm) accessed 04 March 2021.

<sup>231</sup> Among all the clashes the most notorious one was the Alexandretta incident that involved shooting, plunder, and looting by the Armenian legionnaires as well as the Christians (Greeks, Assyrians) of the Muslim shops and then vice versa. Pattie, *The Armenian Legionnaires*, 254, Gautherot, *La France en Syrie*, 134-166.

<sup>232</sup> CADN-SL 131, De commandant Corbieu, les partis politiques arméniens en Cilicie, 1919. Contaut-Biron, *La France*, 98-99.

<sup>233</sup> Kitur, *Patmutyun Henschakian*, 530-570.

<sup>234</sup> More on this process, see Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 93-97.

<sup>235</sup> Pierre Redan, *La Cilicie et le problème ottoman* (Paris, 1921), 95.

replaced by French or Muslim forces.<sup>236</sup> An article published in Paris listed all the difficulties that the French faced in Cilicia, openly declaring that “it was the logical consequence of the French conduct;” and that, despite numerous promises given to the Turks that Cilicia was to be left to Turkey, the opposite had been done.<sup>237</sup> The author then put the entire blame on Brémond’s pro-Armenian attitude and the Armenian Légion, declaring that, “The creation of that Légion and the inclusion of the Armenians in the police and gendarmerie have been wrong and a crime.”<sup>238</sup> Curiously enough, this “crime” would be repeated throughout the mandate years in Syria and Lebanon.

Local Turkish populations spread anti-Armenian and anti-French fliers in an organized manner.<sup>239</sup> The French authorities, nevertheless, continued to assure Armenian leaders that there was nothing to worry about and that the situation was fully under their control.<sup>240</sup> Despite the worsening situation, the Armenian National Union did not meet until January 18, 1920 in Marash. During this meeting, the Union called for efforts to find common ground with the Turks, to learn to live side-by-side again, revive their former trade relations.<sup>241</sup> Three days later the Turkish population revolted against the French occupation of Marash, which lasted until mid-February. French forces decided to retreat on the night of February 11, 1920, keeping the news of their retreat secret from the Armenians.<sup>242</sup> Only 6,000 Armenians, those who lived close to the French military units, noticed the retreat and joined the retreating forces. Others, about 12,000 peaceful Armenians, stayed behind and were massacred. Many who retreated with the French in the middle of the winter night were not fortunate either; between 3,000 and 5,000, especially children, were frozen to death.<sup>243</sup>

The Marash events signaled the beginning of the retreat of the French forces from the whole of Cilicia. After having spent 8 million francs on the repatriation and 40 million francs on the Armenian settlement in Cilicia,<sup>244</sup> French authorities abandoned both the resettlement plan and

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<sup>236</sup> CADN-SL 132, Brémond à le gouverneurs d’Adana, Mersine, Tarsous, Kozan, Osmanié, 31 Octobre 1919.

<sup>237</sup> Édouard Bernier, “La question turque dans l’attente de la solution” (Istanbul, 12 février 1920), *L’Europe nouvelle* (Paris), February 28, 1920, 341-343, 342. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4544884/f7.item>, (accessed on May 24, 2021).

<sup>238</sup> [La création des legions arméniennes, l’incorporation d’arméniens dans la police et la gendarmerie ont été plus qu’une faute. C’était un crime], in *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> *Hay Dzayn*, 20 June 1919, cited in see Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 137.

<sup>240</sup> Hovsep Ter-Vardanian, *Marashi Jarde 1920 ev Hamarot Aknark me ir Antcyalin Vra* [The Massacres of Marash, 1920 and a Brief Background of the Past] (Jerusalem: Araks, 1927), 93.

<sup>241</sup> HAA, fond 200, list 1, file 546, 52-53.

<sup>242</sup> Detailed eye witness accounts on Marash include, Abraham Hartunian, *Neither to Laugh nor to Weep: In Memory of the Armenian Genocide* (Beacon Press, 1968); Stanley E. Kerr, *Lions of Marash, The Personal Experience with American Near East Relief, 1919-1922* (State University of New York Press, 1973).

<sup>243</sup> Sahakian, *Turk-Fransiakan*, 88.

<sup>244</sup> CADN-SL 573, Secretariat generale. “Note relative aux Arméniens de Cilicie, 1920.”

Cilicia altogether.<sup>245</sup> In December 1919, Clemenceau had reportedly declared that “France had no interest in spending anything on the Armenians anymore.”<sup>246</sup> Two years later, the bill for the 500,000 francs provided to the Armenian refugees in the Caucasus and Iran as humanitarian aid in 1916 was presented to the HHA for payment.<sup>247</sup> The HHA was astonished for it had been *humanitarian aid* in the form of military tents, food, and medicine. Clearly, the Armenians were no longer needed to achieve French political aims. On the contrary, they had not only made France lose her position in Cilicia but had endangered her position in Syria. Michel Paillares, the editor of the French language *Bosphorus* newspaper in Istanbul, explained later that “French-Turkish friendship” meant, among other factors, protecting French economic interests in the face of British and Russian imperialism.<sup>248</sup> This statement was based on advice from a high-ranking French official in Istanbul that he should praise the Turks and discredit the Armenians and the Greeks in his paper. For “neither Armenians nor Greeks are, in reality, friends or clients for France as they pretend... What can we expect from them? Nothing useful. If the Turks will let us work, the former will create a competition for us... hindering our economic growth.”<sup>249</sup>

### **French – Turkish Relations and the failed Armenian autonomy**

Well before the events in Marash, French-Turkish relations had entered a new phase of improvement, largely at the expense of the Armenians of Cilicia.<sup>250</sup> At the beginning of December 1919, Picot went to Sivaz to meet Kemal in person.<sup>251</sup> It is noteworthy that Kemal had at first refused to meet him because of his official title “High Commissioner for Syria and Armenia.” Only after clarification that he was the representative of the Yerevan government and not of Cilicia had the meeting taken place.<sup>252</sup> During the two-day talks (December 6–7), the fate of Cilicia was discussed and agreed upon. According to Gontaut-Biron, Picot committed to ceding Cilicia in exchange for exceptional economic concessions in both Cilicia

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<sup>245</sup> In 1920 there were 90 French schools and 106 private schools in Cilicia, see Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 63.

<sup>246</sup> E. Brémond, *La Cilicie*, 12.

<sup>247</sup> Documents on the British foreign policy, first series vol. 11, 734, cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 222.

<sup>248</sup> Aharnonyan, *Sardarapatitc Minchev*, 195.

<sup>249</sup> Michel Paillarès, *Le Kémalisme devant les alliés* (Le cercle d'écrits Caucasiens, 2005), 77-80.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>250</sup> According to the historian Tachjian the shift in the French policy toward the Turks happened at the beginning of 1920, see Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 99.

<sup>251</sup> Gontaut-Biron, *Comment la France*, 333; For details, see Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 115-117.

<sup>252</sup> Ali Fuat Cebesoy, was the first Turkish ambassador to the USSR, Ali Fuat Cebesoy, *Milli mücadele hatıralar* [Memoires of the National-Liberation Movement] (Istanbul, 1953), 269.

and Turkey; a kind of economic mandate.<sup>253</sup> During this meeting, Kemal announced that he recognized only the Mudrus Armistice that did not include Cilicia and, as for the Armenian refugees, “the Yerevan Republic recognized by the Sublime Porte is enough.”<sup>254</sup>

This unofficial negotiation paved the way for the French-Turkish agreement. France believed the agreement was a success because it gave economic advantages to French firms while establishing peace on the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>255</sup> In addition, the French authorities hoped that achieving peace would allow them to concentrate their forces against Faysal. In fact, the agreement had the opposite effect. It not only raised the prestige of Kemal but also resulted in rumors that the French had agreed to return Cilicia out of fear. It was believed that the Marash events were the immediate result of such rumors.<sup>256</sup> Furthermore, if the French had wished to cede Cilicia in order to establish peace in Syria, they had almost certainly misjudged the situation. Melkonian, the DNA representative in Beirut, lamented how misplaced such calculations had been since the Syrians were even more encouraged by the Turkish success to fight for their own independence.<sup>257</sup>

It is noteworthy that, even after the Marash events, the French continued to assure Armenian leaders that all would be well. The Armenian Catholicos Sahak II, for example, was told that “France will do everything possible for the formation of a strong Armenia.”<sup>258</sup> The fate of the Armenians of Marash also befell Armenians elsewhere in Cilicia; for example, in Ayntab, Hajen, Zeitun, and Urfa.<sup>259</sup> In all these cities, the Armenian populations were subjected to terror and widespread massacres for the second time before leaving for Syria and Lebanon.

The Marash events revealed the misconception that the Armenian political leaders had had until that moment. Apparently, many had sincerely believed that the French were in Cilicia to establish an Armenian autonomy as per their promises.<sup>260</sup> On March 5, 1920, a joint telegram representing all three Armenian religious communities was sent to the French authorities and the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul warning that the retreat of the French forces would put all the Armenians in danger and pleading that it should not happen.<sup>261</sup> On March 23, 1920, Damadian himself arrived in Marseille and toured Europe for seven months. On March 31,

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<sup>253</sup> C.R. de Gontaut-Biron et le Révérend, *D'Angora à Lausanne, les étapes d'une déchéance* (Paris, 1924), 12.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>255</sup> Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 81.

<sup>256</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> DNA, Melkonian, 1921-1923, Melkonian, From Melkonian to Noratunkian, Beirut, December 11, 1921.

<sup>258</sup> Vahan L. Khubaserian, *Oragrutyun Ughevorutyun I Evropa Sahak II Katoghikosin Kilikio* [The Diary of Sahak II, the Cilician Catholicos During his Trip to Europe] (Aleppo, Araks, 1928), 7.

<sup>259</sup> Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 197.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>261</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 135, 142.

Sahak II sent a letter to Millerand announcing “that the essential interests of the Armenians coincided with the French interests in the region and, therefore, Armenians would never differentiate between the French and the Armenians if there was an Armenian autonomy.”<sup>262</sup> In vain, Armenian leaders, including Damadian, the National Union, and Sahak II, tried to make sense of this dramatic change in the French policies. Piruz Khanzandian, the famous Henchak leader, wrote to the party’s central administration in the USA “that the French desire to support the Armenians had been honest. It has probably been the inaction of the Armenians ... that has resulted in this disastrous French-Turkish rapprochement.”<sup>263</sup> None of them made the connection between the Armenian maneuvers to obtain an American mandate and the change in the French policy. When they finally did and made calls to establish “an autonomy under the French mandate,” it was already too late. The French had already picked their partner and would not change their policy until 1923, at the final settlement in Lausanne.

As a last desperate step, DNA and its local representatives attempted to force France to remain in Cilicia. The “National Supreme Council” headed by Damadian resolved to take a decisive step and proclaim the autonomy of Cilicia on August 4, 1920.<sup>264</sup> This action was needed to secure Cilicia which was not included in the agreement of Sèvres for which preparations were underway. It was signed on August 10, 1920. Astonishing events took place on the eve of the signature of the treaty. On August 2, 1920, Minas Veradzine, an ARF member, the editor of *Cilicia* newspaper, and the secretary of the Armenian National Union of Adana, proclaimed the autonomy of “Jihun and Sihun Mesopotamia until the sea” under French protection.<sup>265</sup> The next day, another representative of Verkazmial Henchak (reformed Henchak) announced the autonomy of southern Cilicia.<sup>266</sup> According to Madoyan, one of the founding members of the Syrian communist party and a prominent Armenian communist, who gave a detailed account of these events in his memoir, this adventurous act resulted from the traditional rivalry between the two Armenian political parties. Madoyan claimed that such declarations were most likely inspired by the French authorities, who aimed to show that it was the Armenian

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid, also Khubaserian, *Oragrutyun Ughevorutyun*, 142.

<sup>263</sup> HAA, fond 408, list 1, file 139, 1-3, cited in Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 220.

<sup>264</sup> Kitur, *Patmuytun Hunchak*, 570. More on this see, Mihran Tamatian, *Im Husheres*, ed. by Vaché Ghazarian, (Beirut, 1985).

<sup>265</sup> Kitur, *Patmutuyne henchak*, 570.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid 572; Harutyun Madoyan, *Kyank me Patneshi Vra, Husher ev V kayutyunner* [A life on the Barricades] (Beirut, 1988), 39.

leadership who went on “unacceptable adventures” and that all the fault for the failure, therefore, rested with them.<sup>267</sup> Madoyan was not alone in his claims.<sup>268</sup>

On August 4, 1920, a document was sent to the French authorities by the non-Turkish representatives of Cilicia asking for autonomy under French protection. Nine representatives had put their signatures.<sup>269</sup> The next day, on August 5, 1920, for unclear reasons, the delegation decided not to wait for the French reply and instead confronted the French with a “fait accompli.” Damadian announced the independence of Cilicia under French protection in Adana and made public the composition of the government headed by himself and the names of a few ministers. The independence lasted for an hour only.<sup>270</sup>

The determination of the Armenians to succeed was fully matched by the strength of French opposition. This bold action was badly received by the French, who immediately cut their relations with the national delegation and Damadian altogether. Soon, without waiting for the Sèvres treaty to be ratified by the Turkish and French parliaments (which was, in fact, never ratified), the French authorities embarked on implementing its provisions. The first action was to dissolve the Légion in September 1920. The latter was accused of brutality and lack of discipline, while their head Shishmanian and six other members of the national union were exiled. Henschak and the ARF organs – *Davros* and *Cilicia* were censored, while the Ramkavar and Reformed Henschak organs – *Hay Dzayn* and *Cilicia Surhandak*, were not. Armenian forces that were on their way to give relief to Sis and Hadjen, surrounded by the Turkish forces for months, were disarmed and dismissed.<sup>271</sup> The official title of the French High Commissioner was changed immediately from the *High Commissioner of Syria and Armenia* to *High Commissioner of Syria and Cilicia*.

After these events, the Armenian press launched a vehemently anti-French campaign in papers published in the U.S. and *The New Armenia*, in particular, widening even further the gap between the French and the Armenians.<sup>272</sup> Embittered by the press campaigns, de Caix suggested that “it shall be avoided to transport any Armenian in our zone of influence, as it will

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<sup>267</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 39.

<sup>268</sup> Pattie, *The Armenian legionnaires*, 193; “New Aspects” *The New Armenia* (reformed Hunchak organ in the USA), August 1920, 128.

<sup>269</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 39, the full text, see in *Kitur, Patmutyun Hunchak*, 573-575.

<sup>270</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 39. About these last episodes in detail, see in Aram Tourabian, *L'éternelle victim de la diplomatie européenne* (Paris, 1929), 70-83.

<sup>271</sup> Both cities would fall shortly and their starving Armenian populations would be massacred.

<sup>272</sup> Henry Winans Jessup, “They Parted My Gargments Among Them,” Walter George Smith, “The Armenian Boundaries” and “Wronged Armenia,” *The New Armenia*, October 1920, 145, 147, 158-159.



be a new burden.”<sup>273</sup> In addition, General Lamothe threatened anyone trying to migrate to Aleppo with death.<sup>274</sup>

In this light, the assertion that the so-called “coup d’état” was encouraged by the French was becoming even more apparent. It was used to justify the new French policy and the inaction vis-à-vis the Armenians. Moreover, French authorities used these events to claim that the weak French position in both Syria and Cilicia in the face of the Kemalist movement was because of “the errors of the Armenian political parties and the consequences of the Greek policies in the Asia Minor,” and was gradually improving. The takeover of Damascus on July 24, 1920, was a clear sign that French prestige had been restored.<sup>275</sup> Another French paper quoted General Gouraud, saying that the difficult situation for the French in the summer (the successive French defeats in Marash, Urfa, and Bizandi) had improved in the autumn after it was decided “to abandon the pro-Armenian politics.”<sup>276</sup> At that stage, there were calls in the French parliament to abandon both Syria and Cilicia and concentrate instead on human resources and money in Anatolia, Istanbul, and Lebanon.<sup>277</sup> In December 1920, in the Senate, Gouraud was even more blunt about the need to abandon Armenian politics in order to make peace with the Kemalists. There, he was explicit: “The only way to reduce our soldiers in the Middle East is to make peace with Turkey... The first step is to abandon the ‘Armenian politics’... because Armenians are clever people... but fond of secret societies.”<sup>278</sup> It is curious that the French, who would never ratify Sèvres, were so keen to implement its provisions in Cilicia – to evacuate their forces from Ayntab, Urfa, Killis, and Mardin, transfer the command of the local police to the Turks, and dismantle the Légion.<sup>279</sup> Armenians, on the other hand, who were keen to see this treaty implemented, could not help but insist that their demands should also be satisfied. Aharonyan

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<sup>273</sup> MAE, Syrie-Cilicie, 1918-1940, Robert de Caix, télégramme chiffré au général Dufieux, 26 Novembre 1920.

<sup>274</sup> Vazkène Aykouni, *Armeniens, peuple tragique* (Beirut, 1945), 62.

<sup>275</sup> “La situation et le rôle de la France en Syrie et en Cilicie : la commission des finances a entendu hier le general Gourand, le president du conseil et le monstree de la guerre,” *Le Matin*, 21 novembre 21, 1920, 1 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k573429v/f1.image> (accessed on February 19, 2021).

<sup>276</sup> “Notre situation dans le Levant: l’impressionnant exposé du General Gouraud,” *Le Petit Parisien*, novembre 21, 1920, 1. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k604479c/f1.image> (accessed on February 19, 2021).

<sup>277</sup> For example, the speech of the supposedly Armenian friend Victor Bérard at the parliament on January 4, 1921, *Journal officiel de la République Française, débats parlementaires, sénat*, 29 Juillet 1920, 1526.

<sup>278</sup> Commission des finances et des affaires étrangères reunis, 8 decembre 1920, 21, 33, 36, 45, *Archives du Sénat*, 69 S 268.

<sup>279</sup> Already in February 1920, French circles tried to put the entire blame of the French misfortunes in Cilicia on the Armenians : “Le creation des legions arméniennes, incorporations d’arméniens dans la police et la gendarmerie ont été plus qu’une faute.” [The creation of the Armenian Legion, the incorporation of the Armenians in the police – were all wrong]. It was openly declared that divided Turkey meant the end of the French influence in the Middle East: “le démembrement de la Turquie, c’est-à-dire la ruine de l’influence Française dans le proche Orient.” E. Bernier, “La question Turque dans l’attente de la solution,” *L’Europe Nouvelle*, 28 fevrier 1920, 342, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4544884/f6.item#> (accessed on December 20, 2022).

told Briand in December 1920 that if the French evacuation were based on the Sèvres Treaty, the Armenians would demand their territories under the same treaty.<sup>280</sup>

The last unsuccessful attempt to secure autonomy for Cilicia under French protection was made in February 1921 by seven Christians and three Alawi leaders, who sent an appeal to the French, British, Italian, Japanese, and American representatives.<sup>281</sup> The Armenian delegation, for its part, made yet another desperate attempt to secure funding from the U.S. for a continued French presence in Cilicia. In June 1921, Nubar informed Quai d'Orsay that Noratunkian had left for the U.S. to this end.<sup>282</sup> This news was certainly not well received in France because the move threatened to introduce American influence to the region, something the French sought to avoid.<sup>283</sup>

### The evacuation

The fate of Cilicia was decided on October 20, 1921, by the Ankara agreement, when the French ceded it to Turkey.<sup>284</sup> As soon as details of the new agreement became known, thousands of Armenians started to emigrate in such an organized manner that French authorities accused the Armenian religious and political heads of organizing the emigration.<sup>285</sup> The French also refused

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<sup>280</sup> Avetis Aharonyan, *Sardarapatitc Minchev*, 195.

<sup>281</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 129-131.

<sup>282</sup> MAE, Syrie-Cilicie, 1918-1940, Lettre de Nubar à le directeur d'Asie, Paris, 1 juin 1921.

<sup>283</sup> On the loan and the American efforts to secure their foothold in Cilicia, see Gayane Makhmurian, "On the Issue of Origination and Location of the Armenian National Home (1920-1922)," *Review of Armenian Studies*, N: 3:15, (2017), 76-97, 83, 94. On the French refusal of the Armenian claim in Cilicia, see the declarations of Le Nail, the head of the Eastern Department of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the French parliament, "Home is a necessity for the Armenians, however, it must be formed on the eastern borderlands, in the region of Kars but not in Cilicia," cited in Vahan Papazian, *Im Husheres*, vol 3:277. On the intensified British-American propaganda, see also NARA, Confidential Consular Reports. "I was considerably impressed at the time by the fact that the British political officers in Syria were conducting a campaign of propaganda against the French. It seemed that their object in so doing was to create a situation which would compel the LoNs to offer the Mandate to England (in view of her engagements with France England could not seek it openly). The second object of the British (failing to secure the mandate herself) was to influence the offering of the Mandate to the United States. They evidently believed for obvious reasons that America would prove less dangerous to their interests in the Near East than would France. The manoeuver on the part of the British was note theory. My conversations with their political officers at the time and with others whom they influenced, convinced me that it was a fact." NARA, 466 (4 of 4), Confidential Files, 1926, January 1st to May 1st, Beirut, Lebanon. From Paul Knabenshue, Consul in charge American Consulate General to the Secretary of State, "Political Situation in Syria: Historical Factors and French Policies under the Mandate," Part I, January 26, 1926, 3-4. More on the French-British competition, see James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

<sup>284</sup> One week before the Ankara agreement, on 13 October, a Turkish-Russian treaty was signed in Kars that ceded to Turkey substantial Armenian territories, including Kars, Ardahan, Kaghzvan and Surmalu. It is noteworthy that an article penned by certain Alfred Jacque in *Echos de l'Islam* on November 15, 1921 (N:39), mentioned explicitly that the "Ankara agreement had two winners – France and Turkey, and two losers – Great Britain and the Bolsheviks," cited in Aykouni, *Arméniens*, 64.

<sup>285</sup>Details on the evacuation see, Benjamin Thomas White, "A Grudging Rescue." The Evacuation from the Armenian Perspective see Kitur, *Patmutuyn Hunchakyan*, 611.

to accept the emigrants in neighboring countries under their mandate.<sup>286</sup> It was argued that the treaty included “minority protection” provisions and after all the settlement efforts, there was no need for the Armenians to leave. On November 6, 1921, a pan-Armenian meeting took place in the Armenian church in Adana headed by Sahak II. The conclusion of this meeting was to not *hinder the emigration* and find suitable transportation means.<sup>287</sup> Even if some Armenians remained undecided, an article published on November 14, 1921, in the local press, entitled “Allez-vous-en,” convinced them. The article stated that all the Christians – particularly Greeks and Armenians (men, women, and children included) – were “*komitajis*” who wished to deliver the (Turkish) homeland to the capitalists and the imperialist Europeans.<sup>288</sup> Despite all the French threats to not leave, by the end of November, there were only 60,000 Armenians left.<sup>289</sup>

It was not until the end of November 1921, that the Armenians gathered in Mersin were transported to Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Greece, and Izmir. The Cilicia evacuation was followed by the Smyrna crisis in September 1922, with more refugees pouring into Aleppo and Alexandretta.<sup>290</sup>

In addition to the dramatic events in Cilicia right before the evacuation, the unwillingness of the French authorities to accept these refugees in Syria or Lebanon further complicated the relations between the two. A boat with 2,000 refugees on board was reportedly refused by Cyprus, Egypt, Syria, and Greece, before Dr. Melkonian, the representative of the DNA in Beirut, managed to persuade the French High Commissioner to accept them.<sup>291</sup> The High Commissioner had justified the refusal by saying that the local populations did not wish to host any refugees. The same source mentions that, in response, Dr. Melkonian had replied that the same population did not wish to see the French in their country either.<sup>292</sup> On December 11, 1921, Melkonian sent a telegram to Paris announcing the good news that the French had finally agreed to accept 15,000 Armenian refugees.<sup>293</sup> The French had agreed to accept them on the condition that the support they provided would not last for more than three months. Indeed, Melkonian’s letter to Paris at the end of January 1922 confirmed that 25–30,000

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<sup>286</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 162.

<sup>287</sup> Kepelian, “Kilikan Hay Demker,” 36. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>288</sup> Aykouni, *Arméniens*, 61-62, Gontaut-Biron et le Reverend, *D’Angora*, 88.

<sup>289</sup> Aykouni, *Arméniens*, 62.

<sup>290</sup> On Smyrna crisis, see Michelle Tusan, *Smyrna’s Ashes* (Berkeley: California UP, 2012); Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Marjorie Housepian, *The Smyrna Affair* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); George Horton, *The Blight of Asia* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Mererill, 1953); Edward Hale Bierstadt, *The Great Betrayal* (New York: McBride, 1924).

<sup>291</sup> Sisak Varjapetian, *Hayere Libanani Mej: Hanragitaran Libananahay Gaghuti* [Armenians in Lebanon, an Encyclopedia] (Beirut 1951), 2:41.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Varjapetian, *Hayere Libanani Mej*, 43.

refugees had arrived, that they were dispersed everywhere, and none was at French expense. French authorities distributed bread and soup (1 franc per person, per day) to a limited number of people (2,000) and only in Damascus, Juniye, and Saida.<sup>294</sup> However, as early as February 1922, the French authorities attempted to dismantle the camps under the pretext that the refugees should not get used to laziness and continuous support. They also declared that the French humanitarian mission vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees of Cilicia was accomplished thanks to generous French hospitality in Syria and Lebanon. Care for the refugees was out of the question; instead, the Armenians, a people famous for their wealth, should do it themselves.<sup>295</sup> Melkonian reported that the local Armenians, the Red Cross, the Near East Relief (NER), and many other charities were mobilized. The army provided tents while the NER supplied wood and settled some families in abandoned *khans*. In May 1922, Sahak II met General Gauraud and discussed the refugee issue but did not ask for financial help for “they do not like it; our people will get their bread from the stones.”<sup>296</sup> In 1923, 17,555 persons were fed daily in Aleppo, where there were reportedly 35,000 refugees.<sup>297</sup> The number of the people fed by the French authorities decreased sharply over the following months: 15,988 in February, 14,924 in March, and only 6,000 in June 1922;<sup>298</sup> 60,000 francs were provided by the Syrian authorities.<sup>299</sup> The French delegate stated in a comprehensive report that the French had appealed to the locals and especially the Christians of Aleppo to help the refugees. Most Armenian refugees considered Syria a transit stop while they tried to emigrate to the U.S. Refugees were informed that, as of March 25, 1923, no further aid was to be provided to them. It was up to the refugees to find food, employment, and accommodation.<sup>300</sup> Melkonian, in his turn, was told that in case the local municipalities attempted to claim back the lands on which the camps were established, the High Commissioner would be able to do nothing.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> It also mentioned that  $\frac{3}{4}$  had paid themselves for their transportation costs from Mersin to Beirut, and from there to Damascus. The same report also provided the exact number of Armenians in Cilicia before the evacuation: 40-45,000 in Adana, 15,000 in Tarsus and Mersine, 8-10,000 in Dort Yol, 5,000 in Osmanieye, Jihaniye, 8,500 in Aintab, 6-7,000 in Kilis, 12-15,000 in Sis and Hadjn, as well as 15,000 other Christians (Greeks, Assyrian, and Chaldean), see in DNA, folder Melkonian, 1921-1923, from Melkonian to Noratunkian, January 24, 1922, 16.

<sup>295</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, from Melkonian to Noratunkian, April 25, 1922.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid, from Sahal II to Noratunkian, May 5, 1922.

<sup>297</sup> CADN-SL 966, Service des Reinseignem., Rapport sur l'exode des chrétiens d'Anatolie et de Cilicié en Syrie, 14 mars 1923. A ration of food consisted of 312g bread, 100g beans, 12g bacon and costed 30 centimes per day.

<sup>298</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le Haut-Commissaire à son Excellence, Monsieur le Président du Conseil et ministre des Affaires Etrangères, “La protection des femmes et des enfants à Alep,” Beyrouth, 30 decembre 1924.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> CADN-SL 966, Le délégué adjoint du Haut Commissaire, président de la Commission à le Haut Commissaire, “Rapport, les refugies arméniens à Alep,” 3 mars 1923.

<sup>301</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, Beirut from doctor inspector Emily to Melkonian October 9, 1922.

Was the French evacuation of Cilicia a purely *humanitarian* project, as is rhetorically and rightly asked by historian White in his article.<sup>302</sup> Evidence suggests that it was not. Earlier that year (March 1921), in the London conference, the contentious term “Armenian national home” had been coined, and this would haunt the Armenian refugees during the entire interwar period in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>303</sup> Although the exact geography was to be identified by the LoN, it was understood that the focus was on Eastern Anatolia. The Sovietization of the Armenian state poured cold water on British plans, as annexing more territories from Turkey would have meant strengthening Bolshevik Russia. On the other hand, fresh Armenian massacres in Marash (winter 1920), the question of the safety of the repatriated refugees, and rumors of the French withdrawal from Cilicia all seem to have renewed British-American interest in Cilicia.<sup>304</sup> That is why in London (March 1921), Armenians were privately advised to insist on a “national home” in *Cilicia*, not Eastern Anatolia.<sup>305</sup> American backing for the continuous French-Armenian occupation in Cilicia with a Congressional loan of 20 million dollars was offered too.<sup>306</sup> In fact, the British-American “danger” is best explained by Brémond, the governor of Cilicia, who explained that, given the evacuation crises, Armenian Protestants had explicitly appealed to the British for support. The U.S. was also involved since a certain Sahen, an American citizen, was in Adana on behalf of the Henschaks. Besides, both British and American missionaries were involved in the relief in Cilicia.<sup>307</sup> Later, the Aleppo delegate was even more explicit, claiming that during the Cilician evacuation, British propaganda did everything to give political overtones to the American relief efforts and turn the Armenians against the French.<sup>308</sup>

One thing is clear; the French were extremely sensitive about any British-American interest in or cooperation with the Armenian refugee leaders. Although characteristic of the entire interwar period, this tendency was especially strong right after the Cilician evacuation and during the Lausanne negotiations, when the Armenian press openly expressed anti-French sentiments. For example, a French intelligence report by a “well-placed informer” stated that anti-French articles were published in the ARF press of Istanbul, *Jakatamat*, on April 13, 1923, in which the French were openly blamed, whereas the U.S. was considered the only real

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<sup>302</sup> Benjamin T. White, “A Grudging Rescue.”

<sup>303</sup> Previously, the same wording had been used in the first Zionist Congress of 1897 as a means to avoid reference to a Jewish state, as well as in the famous Balfour declaration. Howard M. Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East, 1914-1924* (New York, 1969), 214.

<sup>304</sup> Malkasian, “The Disintegration of the Armenian Cause,” 355.

<sup>305</sup> Avetis Aharonyan, *Sardarapatitc*, 54.

<sup>306</sup> Malkasian, “The Disintegration of the Armenian Cause,” 355. See also Makhmurian, “On the Issue.”

<sup>307</sup> CADN-SL 573, Secretariat generale. “Note relative aux Arméniens de Cilicie, 1920.”

<sup>308</sup> On the British-American propanganda and potential dangers, see CADN-SL 575, “Arméniens d’Alep : historique, leur nombre, les notables, les parties politiques,” 1924.

supporter of the Armenian national cause.<sup>309</sup> This article had announced that “France had betrayed the Armenians... who shall never forgive her, for she had given false assurances but, in reality, had pursued her own interests, by backing the Turks. Armenians are sure that the British would have acted differently... Besides, it is in these two countries (Britain and the U.S.) that we have our biggest and most important political organizations... British could also help us to reconcile with the Kurds...”<sup>310</sup> Notably, the same report considered the ARF to be the most disciplined and important party. This may explain why the French authorities decided to win over the ARF in particular, as we shall see in the later chapters, and thus mitigated the most serious challenge.<sup>311</sup>

This may explain why French authorities were keen to evacuate the refugees, including the orphanages, except for one orphanage in Adana, from Cilicia once it became obvious that the latter would not remain there under the Turkish rule despite all the assurances given to them. The French feared that the continued Armenian presence would attract the British and American influence that France wished to avoid.<sup>312</sup>

The Armenians, on the other hand, were almost certain that the evacuation of Cilicia was not final and that the French could not possibly abandon it so easily. Sahak II sent an appeal to the governments of the Allied forces on January 7, 1922, announcing, “Armenians and other Christians fled Cilicia under the current circumstances, it in no way cancels their right of a national home there... Allies shall consider the fact that Christians were absolute majority in

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<sup>309</sup> CADN-SL 573, Note speciale, “La mentalité des partis politique arméniens,” 23 avril 1923, (d’un informateur consciencieux et paraissant très bien placé).

<sup>310</sup> CADN-SL 573, Note speciale, “Le problème de la Grande Arménie ou du Foyer Arménien,” 23 avril 1923.

<sup>311</sup> French mandatory authorities monitored closely the activities of the Armenian political leaders holding a long list of their most prominent members and their activities. These men were divided into several categories, the most influential and the richest, then according to their political views. In the last category, there were three different lists; pro-French, where there were most of the Catholics and those educated in France; pro-British, most of the Protestants and those educated in the American-British universities, and pro-Faysal and therefore also pro-British. The French report cautioned that all of these men worked hard to give a political character to the Armenian refugee community, nevertheless, their actions remained uncoordinated and highly individualist. Moreover, the report claimed, that thanks to the relief efforts of the American Red Cross and other missionary activities refugees retained a certain sense of community. CADN-SL 575, Service des Renseignements, “Differentes organisations existant à l’heure actuelle parmi les Arméniens d’Alep : historique, leur nombre, les notables, les parties politiques,” source, autorités religieuses arméniennes, notables arméniens, agents, Alep, 10 août 1924.

<sup>312</sup> On the French fears, that British and American circles used their relief efforts provided by the American Red Cross and the Near East Relief – the largest in the Middle East, to convince the Armenian refugees that the French mandate in Syria was against their interests and that only the British and the Americans could provide them security, see CADN-SL 573, De Lamothé à le Haut-Commissaire, “Arméniens d’Alep,” 7 December 1923. CADN-SL 575, Service des Renseignements, “Differentes organisations existant à l’heure actuelle parmi les Arméniens d’Alep : historique, leur nombre, les notables, les parties politiques,” source, autorités religieuses arméniennes, notables arméniens, agents, Alep, 10 aout 1924. It must be noted, however, NER continued to keep most of its orphanages in Turkey including Cilicia hoping to continue their activities. Both NER and the French were compelled to evacuate their remaining orphanages from Turkey in 1922. See Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 217-247.

Cilicia while deciding on its future definitive status.”<sup>313</sup> Meanwhile, Nubar instructed both Sahak II and Melkonian to keep the Armenian refugees regrouped in Syria and Lebanon, with their former internal organization intact because this would maintain their political importance in order to serve as a basis for a final settlement, which was imminent.<sup>314</sup> Even as late as mid-1924, Arshak Chobanian, another Ramkavar affiliated individual, and a famous writer, gave an interview to *Zartonk*, in which he reportedly stated that “I cannot say that the fate of Cilicia is solved definitely. Nothing is solved in the East; everything depends on the future. Armenians must devote themselves to reconstruction, economic, and intellectual life without writing and talking about it, and wait for future justice.”<sup>315</sup> Such talks would continue throughout the 1920s. For the Armenians, at least, the issue of Cilicia was not yet closed.

### **The final play: Lausanne negotiations and the treaty**

In the autumn of 1922, talks about the formation of an Armenian “national home” in Cilicia were once again among the most debated topics in Lausanne and Aleppo. In fact, such talks never ceased among the Armenians, and the possible location of such a “home” got closer to the Syrian borders, including the possibility of having it in northern Syria.

As negotiations advanced in Lausanne, rumors about such a homeland intensified. Armenians from all over the world closely followed the negotiations in Lausanne, where the fate of the refugees was to be decided. This was also the case in Aleppo. An editorial on the first page of the *Suriakan Mamul* informed its readers that negotiations in Lausanne had already started. It also wondered about the eventual fate of the refugees; would Soviet Armenia be able to host them? Would it have enough lands and means to do so?<sup>316</sup> A few days later, the same newspaper wondered how the Armenians would be able to organize repatriation if many Armenian leaders in different colonies fought against the Soviet Armenian government?<sup>317</sup> On December 7, 1922, Nazarbek, the founder of the Henschak party, penned an article, in which he criticized those who lobbied for a “national home” in Cilicia at the expense of Soviet Armenia.

You do not recognize Soviet Armenia, which is an Armenian state; instead, you demand a national home in Cilicia, far away from Soviet Armenia, where all the Armenian refugees will be settled and work under your rule “to develop that home”... You insist

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<sup>313</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 130.

<sup>314</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian, 1921-1923, letters to Babken Kuleserian, from Noratunkian to Sahak II, February 18, 1922; from Noratunkian to Melkonian, July 17, 1923.

<sup>315</sup> Chobanian published a letter about the Syrian Armenians, cited in “Chobanian Zartonkin Ughatc ir Mek Namakov Suriabnak Hayutyanyan Hetevyal Teladranke Kane” [Chobanian Dictates the Armenians of Syria], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 15, 1924, 2.

<sup>316</sup> “Mer Orakarge Seghani Vra” [Our Agenda on the Table], *Suriakan Mamul*, November 30, 1922, 1.

<sup>317</sup> “Hangervani Me Entrutyune” [The Choice of the Shelter], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 3, 1922, 1.

that there is still an Armenian cause, which is not the liberation of the six Armenian vilayets, as it used to be, for it borders Soviet Armenia. Instead, the national cause now is the formation of a national home in Cilicia... We shall not be surprised to see you even cooperate with Kemal in order to achieve your goals.<sup>318</sup>

On January 2, 1923, Noratunkian, who now headed the DNA, wrote to Sahak II, the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, directly from Lausanne, informing him that the British and the Americans thought the “national home” should be in the Amanos region, including Ayntab, Kilis, Marash, Sis, and the territories between the Jihun and Euphrates rivers.<sup>319</sup> In this letter he was inquiring from the Catholicos about the exact number of the Armenians already there and the capacity of the region to take more refugees. He also asked about the Armenian relationship with the local Turks, assuring him that with the 20-million-dollar loan from the American Congress and their own 300,000 sterling, they should be able to buy land from the local Turks.<sup>320</sup> On January 14, the *Suriakan Mamul* reported that Child, the American delegate, had proposed an Armenian “national home” on the Syrian-Turkish border, from Yumaralgen to Mardin (25,000 km square), although this was not an official American demand.<sup>321</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon were elated by the rumors of the possible creation of a “national home” in Cilicia. The *Surakan Mamul* advised calm, as neither the LoN was behind the plan nor were the conditions in place; it was just a rumor. “Armenians shall understand that what is real, is today’s situation, the existence of Soviet Armenia – the only national home.”<sup>322</sup> However, the DNA and its representative had a different view. In case the Cilicia plans failed completely, “Syria can become a very comfortable *home* for our refugees as long as they are not dispersed.” Melkonian even suggested two regions best suited for such a settlement – Greater Lebanon and the Alawites.<sup>323</sup>

No wonder then that during the entire lengthy negotiations of the Lausanne treaty, as had been the case previously, the French were categorically against any Armenian “national home” in Cilicia.<sup>324</sup> All efforts to reach an agreement with them were in vain. In Lausanne, the Armenians based their claims on the resolution passed by the British Parliamentary Council right after the London conference on a “non-Turkish state between the Taurus and the

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<sup>318</sup> “Azgayin Ojakh” [A National Home], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 7, 1922, 1.

<sup>319</sup> In the original text 1922 and not 1923 is mentioned, which, in our opinion, is a mistake, as it says the letter was sent from Lausanne where the negotiations were underway. Lausanne negotiations started in November 1922 and lasted until July 1923. Archives of Catholicosate, Sahak II files, file 66/1, in Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 237.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Editorial, “Azgayin Ojakh” [A National Home], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 14, 1923, 1.

<sup>322</sup> Editorial, “Haykakan Ojakh Khndire” [The issue of the Armenian home], *Suriakan Mamul*, May 7, 1922, 1.

<sup>323</sup> DNA, Beirut, 30 march 1923 from Melkonian to Noratunkian, a long and comprehensive report.

<sup>324</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:246.



Amanos.”<sup>325</sup> Thus, the Armenians demanded the neutral zone in the Amanos-Ayntab region of Cilicia, on a small territory of 17,000 km square, which they argued went neither against the French territorial demands nor the Turkish *misaki el-milli* (The National Pact).<sup>326</sup> The French authorities organized a parliamentary debate on the issue, where Le Nail, the head of the Eastern department of the French Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, declared that, according to the French government, “home is a necessity for the Armenians; however, it must be formed on the Eastern borderlands, or in Kars, but not in Cilicia.”<sup>327</sup> While, by the end of January 1923, French senator Victor Bérar had told Armenian representatives, “we must first sign the peace treaty and then settle Armenian refugees in Syria and Alexandretta.”<sup>328</sup> Was there already a French plan for the Armenian refugees? The DNA reported to Dr. Melkonian shortly before the conclusion of the Lausanne negotiations, that several French deputies had made positive statements about an opportunity to create an Armenian home (foyer Arménien) in Syria. The plan would aim to reinforce the Christian element in the country and facilitate the French mandate politically, economically, and even militarily.<sup>329</sup>

Although Noratunkian felt that Armenian and French interests could potentially overlap in this initiative, there was a need to study the local conditions carefully before embarking on any concrete project. This clearly showed that the Armenian side had its own interests and was far from being an instrument in the hands of the third powers. At the same time, the French were not their only partners. From another letter addressed to Melkonian, it becomes clear that further appeals were made in Washington, the LoN, and other member states. As a result, the American consulate of Aleppo initiated inquiries among the refugees that again angered the French and raised their suspicions.<sup>330</sup> In this sense, the ongoing anti-Armenian sentiments among the Syrians actually benefited the French. They, too, occasionally made sure that the Armenians were aware of their precarious conditions necessitating protection, which only the French could guarantee. Throughout this dissertation, we shall demonstrate that some of the anti-Armenian polemics in the Syrian nationalist papers were systematically initiated or

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<sup>325</sup> For a detailed account based on the American and Armenian archives as well as the archives of DNA on the Armenian “national home,” see G. Makhmourian, “On the Issue of Origination and Location of the Armenian National Home, 1920-1922,” *Review of Armenian Studies* 3:15 (2017), 76-97.

<sup>326</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:266.

<sup>327</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:277.

<sup>328</sup> In the summer of 1921 Khatisyan was told by Briand, the French foreign minister that the issue of Caucasus ought to wait until French negotiations with Turkey were finalized. However, once the Ankara agreement was concluded, Khatisyan was puzzled to be advised by Franklin-Boullion, to do propaganda in favor of the full membership of Turkey to the LoN. See in Papazian, *Im Husheres*, vol:297, 184, 126.

<sup>329</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian, 1921-1923, From Noratunkian to Melkonian, May 3, 1923.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid*, From Noratunkian to Melkonian June 3, 1923.

encouraged directly by the French authorities. They were aimed at preventing any Armenian-Syrian rapprochement, putting pressure on both sides in order to achieve French political goals.

As both Armenian delegations in Lausanne knocked desperately at the doors of the international delegates, asking them to put pressure on the Turkish side to accommodate their demands, cold water was poured on their proposals by the Soviet delegation. Chicherin, the Soviet foreign minister, announced that the Soviet Union was ready to host and settle all the Armenian refugees on the vast territories in Kuban and Crimea (not Soviet Armenia). This proposition made it seem as if the Armenians had demanded to be settled just anywhere where there were available lands and not necessarily in their ancestral homeland. The Soviet offer, without doubt, made a great impression on the Allies and presented a welcome solution to the European powers, who did not know how to get rid of the Armenian demands. It is noteworthy that the Soviet Armenian leaders, Lukashin and Myasnikan, were displeased with Moscow's policy toward the Armenian refugees and hoped to achieve more through their Istanbul representative Makintsyan behind Moscow's back.<sup>331</sup>

Finally, the Lausanne Treaty was concluded on July 24, 1923. Not only did it fail to solve the issue of the Ottoman Armenians, but it also omitted to mention them at all. Instead, the Treaty contained several minority protection clauses.<sup>332</sup> Nevertheless, talks about an "Armenian national home" would not cease; on the contrary, they became more intense. A few months after the conclusion of the Treaty, in December 1923, Armenian delegates were again heard at the LoN's minority subcommittee. The subcommittee again discussed the geographic location of the future Armenian "home," first on the Armenian vilayets in Eastern Anatolia and then in Cilicia. The Armenian delegation's response, when asked where exactly they wished to see their "national home," was that it should be on the Syrian borderlands: between the Jihun and Euphrates rivers.<sup>333</sup>

During all this time, including the entire eight months period of negotiations of the Lausanne Treaty and well beyond, the Ottoman Armenians were constantly assured that a free homeland – a national home – was being secured for them, and the only issue that remained was the exact geography of that homeland. It had all seemed real and convincing. Before the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, the Armenian refugees considered their presence in the territories where they resided as temporary and waited patiently for the world leaders to decide the location of their final homeland after the treaty's conclusion. However, as it turned out,

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<sup>331</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:292.

<sup>332</sup> Part 1, Article 40, 42.3, 44, Part 3, Article 90a, 90b, see in *Hask*, (August- September 1965), 380-387.

<sup>333</sup> LoN's minority subcommittee minutes, December 26, 1923, Geneva, cited in Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:424.

there was nowhere to return to. Their entry to Turkey was forbidden, leaving them instantly stateless.

Speculation about the Armenian “national home” by the Great Powers, and competition between them, on the other hand, had made Armenian refugees of Cilicia susceptible in the eyes of the French, who had already received the mandates for Syria and Lebanon. In such conditions of mutual distrust and suspicion, French-administered Syria and Lebanon became home to the Armenian refugees for the second time.

### **Syria and Lebanon become a new home again**

The flow of the Armenian refugees from Cilicia to Syria and Lebanon started at the end of 1921 and continued throughout the following years. Aleppo and Beirut, in particular, became major concentration centers, where Armenian influx changed the demographic fabric dramatically. By 1925, there were 40,000 Armenians in Lebanon, almost all of whom lived in Beirut, forming the largest Christian community there.<sup>334</sup> At the same time, there were about 89,000 Armenian refugees in Syria, out of which 45,000 lived in the Aleppo region; again, the majority (42,000) lived in Aleppo.<sup>335</sup> Their numbers mattered as the population of Aleppo counted for just 15,6748 persons in 1922,<sup>336</sup> while that of Beirut was 75,000, out of which 20,000 were Armenian refugees.<sup>337</sup> The last refugee shelter in Aleppo would be destroyed only on June 30, 1940.<sup>338</sup>

In November 1921, Dr. Melkonian, was appointed as the representative of DNA in Beirut before the French authorities. Melkonian, who swore to serve the DNA and the “nation” in his best capacity, became a key figure in Armenian life after the evacuation. With his official status, he met the French High Commissioner as well as the local Lebanese authorities and used all his personal contacts to arrange the hosting and settlement of the Cilician refugees. On December 9, 1921, he met with de Caix, who suggested avoiding a large concentration of refugees. Potential centers included Damascus (which was predominantly Muslim), Aleppo (which was identified as problematic), and Latakia (the Alawite region, which was favored).

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<sup>334</sup> CADN-SL 574, le Haut-Commissariat à le délégué-adjoint à Dabal Druze, “Note, Sur les questions Arménienne dans les Etats sous mandat français,” Beyrouth, 26 novembre 1935.

<sup>335</sup> CADN-SL 576, Comprehensive Report, Armenians, February 1931.

<sup>336</sup> Out of total 156,748 persons 97,600 (62.26%) were Muslims; 22,117 (14.11%) native Christians (mostly Catholics); 6,580 (4.20%) Jews; 2,652 (1.70%) Europeans; 20,007 (12.76%) Armenian refugees and 7,792 (4.97%) others. The number of refugees rose to 45,000 by 1925. Mohammad Fuad Ayntabi and Najwa Othman, *Aleppo in One Hundred Years 1850–1950* (Aleppo, 1994), 3:26; Al-Ghazzi, *Nahr al-dhahab*, 1: 256, 3:449–450.

<sup>337</sup> Own corres., “Beyruti Azgayin Kyanken” [The National Life in Beirut], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 5, 1922, 2.

<sup>338</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le délégué-adjoint du Haut-Commissaire d’Alep à le Haut-Commissaire, “Etablissement les refugies arméniens à Alep,” 6 juillet 1940.

De Caix suggested that the vast majority ought to be settled in Greater Lebanon, which had its own substantial Christian population.<sup>339</sup> However, the French authorities were not the only players Melkonian met to discuss the settlement. First of all, he met with the Mgr Hoyek, the Maronite patriarch, as well as the influential Christian Lebanese notables regrouped under the so-called “Lebanese Committee” “in order to prevent any hostility from the local population.”<sup>340</sup> According to Melkonian, both the patriarch and the notables showed a reasonably positive attitude and promised to intercede before the French High Commission to allow and facilitate the arrival of the Cilician refugees. They had been especially eager to settle them in the mountainous regions, where Christian populations had suffered the most and perished in thousands during the famine and WWI.<sup>341</sup> The notables agreed that the refugees could freely choose where to be settled and practice any profession they wished. Melkonian highlighted this last point as “very important” given the growing antipathy of the Muslims who were increasingly inspired by the Kemalists’ sudden success.<sup>342</sup> These meetings and discussions are important, as they prove that the French mandatory authorities did not take the decision to host the refugees alone, as claimed previously by many scholars.<sup>343</sup> It is clear that the powerful Lebanese Christian community (the Maronite Patriarch himself and other notables) gave their approval too, and probably did so before the French. In Melkonian’s letter, it appears they were expected to interfere before the French informing about their favorable position. It should also be noted that although the Christian notables supported the arrival of the Christian Armeniad refugees, their view was not shared by the majority of the Muslims. The latter, who were for Syrian unity, believed the presence of Christian Armenians threatened their plans. The Muslims of Beirut, headed by the Mufti, had demanded that de Caix should not increase the existing economic and housing crisis in Beirut by accepting Armenian refugees. Reportedly, this had been the main reason behind the initial French refusal to accept refugees. Although the Muslims had eventually agreed to host them, they did so after putting forward a condition – an oral understanding – to not extend citizenship to them for at least three years.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, From Melkonian to Noratunkian, Beirut, December 11, 1921.

<sup>340</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, From Melkonian to Noratunkian, Beirut, December 11, 1921.

<sup>341</sup> A French report specified that during the War and until June 1917, 150,000 persons had reportedly perished in Greater Lebanon, because of famine and diseases. It was believed that more than half of them had been Maronites. The same report also specified that in Syria (including Lebanon) there were hardly 240,000 – 250,000 Maronites left, out of which 160,000 in the Greater Lebanon. See in MAE Guerre 1914-1918, N: 879, 25-57; Defrance, *Ministre de France en Egypte à son Excellence M. A. Ribot, Président du Conseil, Ministre des Affaires étrangères, Le Caire, le 8 octobre 1918.*

<sup>342</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, From Melkonian to Noratunkian, Beirut, December 11, 1921.

<sup>343</sup> White, “Refugees and the Definition of Syria 1920-1939,” *Past and Present* N: 235 (2017), 141-178; Ellen Marie Lust-Okar, “Failure of Collaboration: Armenian Refugees in Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32:1 (1996) 53-68.

<sup>344</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921-1923, Melkonian to Noratunkian, March 11, 1923.

After securing the agreement of the Lebanese elite, Melkonian then met with de Caix. During this meeting, de Caix told him that ceding Cilicia was the new French policy in the East, and the French intended to carry it out. However, the Turks, who were at war with Greece, would probably ask the French to remain in Cilicia to ensure order. On this last point, Melkonian bitterly noted that the agreement did not only help the French keep the Syrians on their side but also gave more encouragement to the Muslims to fight against foreign rule.<sup>345</sup>

In January 1922, when Sahak II arrived in Beirut, Melkonian was instrumental in organizing high-level meetings for him with the French mandatory and Lebanese authorities, presenting Sahak II as the foremost religious leader of the Cilician Armenians.<sup>346</sup>

This chapter showed how the Armenian efforts to secure a “national home” with the collaboration of all the possible external players made the Armenians disloyal in the eyes of the French. French mandatory authorities were constantly alerted to any possible Armenian alliance with the British or the Americans, who showed great interest in the refugees and could jeopardize French authority in the Levant. Armenians, on the other hand, considered the French retreat from Cilicia a betrayal and could not forget it, nor could they rely on French promises. Consequently, French-Armenian relations were tense and filled with mutual distrust and suspicion. This state of affairs continued throughout the mandate years.

### **Chapter III: The international framework, the French mandate, and the Armenians**

This chapter briefly describes the international framework, the mandate system, and the main modes of French governance in Syria. It also shows the emerging policies vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees and the first ad-hoc refugee settlement experiments.

#### **French governance in Syria, institutionalizing sectarianism**

The policies of the French in Syria were greatly informed by their pre-War policies in the Levant. Back then, French economic investments in Syria had been uneven, favoring coastal regions over the interior, thus unintentionally empowering the populations of those regions. As it happened, these coastal regions, which included Mount Lebanon, Beirut, and the Syrian coast, were mostly home to different religious and ethnic minorities; for example, Maronites,

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<sup>345</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, From Melkonian to Noratunkian, Beirut, December 11, 1921.

<sup>346</sup> Sahak II's delegation was composed of Khat, Jacques Sarrafian (the head of Protestants), Khubaserian, Baron, Peztikian, see in DNA, Melkonian, 1921-1923, from Melkonian to Noratunkian, January 24, 1922.

Alawites, and Ismailis, as opposed to the mainly Sunni Arab populations of the interior.<sup>347</sup> French authorities in the Levant, who predominantly drew on their previous experience in North Africa and Morocco,<sup>348</sup> expected unmitigated hostility from the Sunni Muslims. In order to balance this antipathy, they sought to counterbalance the Sunnis by establishing closer ties with the other communities. Such policies rested on the French claims to be the protector of the “Chrétiens d’Orient” and “Mission Civilisatrice” since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which, ultimately, resulted in clientelism.<sup>349</sup> For example, the support provided to these various communities presented them as “more advanced” (taking into consideration their desire for European values and knowledge) compared to the religious fanaticism, and narrow-mindedness of the Muslims.<sup>350</sup> These ethnic and religious groups were, therefore, encouraged to think that their interests were contrary to those of the Sunnis.

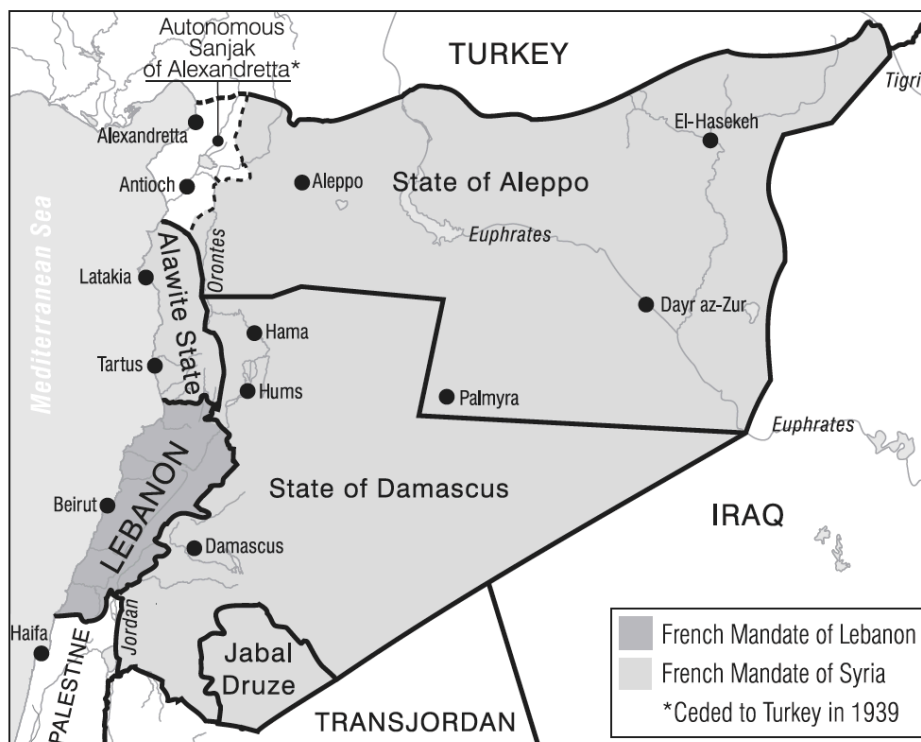


Figure 3. French mandate in Syria and Lebanon. Wikipedia.

<sup>347</sup> 69 % were Sunni Muslims, 16 % heterodox Muslims (Alawites, Druzes, Isma’ili), and the remaining 14 % were Christians, including Catholics, Uniates and Greek Orthodox, see in Koury, *Syria*, 14.

<sup>348</sup> Edmund Burke, III, “A comparative View of French Native Policy in Morocco and Syria, 1912-1925,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 9:3 (1973), 175-186.

<sup>349</sup> On the eve of WWI, there were about 500 French schools run by the diverse missionaries across the whole Ottoman Empire that were attended by 59,414 students. Sahakyan, *Turk-fransiakan*, 63.

<sup>350</sup> Khoury, *Syria*, 28.

Over time, such interpretation strengthened the dividing lines between the diverse communities. Throughout the mandate years, the ties between the French and the coastal communities were further cemented through a policy of favoritism.<sup>351</sup> After a difficult takeover of Syria, the French authorities quickly embarked on partitioning the country into much smaller units, managing it with their preferred “hands-on” micromanagement method.<sup>352</sup> The basis of the French policy was Robert de Caix’s assertion that French interests dictated the creation of mini client statelets to avoid any Syrian unity.<sup>353</sup> With the motto of “divide and rule,” and under the pretext of protecting religious and ethnic minorities, four such states emerged. In 1920, Aleppo State was created, but Alexandretta Sanjak was removed from it and made autonomous. Then, Damascus State and the Alawite territory were created; the latter became a state in 1922, and the State of Jabal al-Druze was created in March 1921. Lebanon’s independence was ensured in 1922. Thus, all so-called “compact minorities” – Sunnis, Maronites, Alawis, and Druze – were given their own states.<sup>354</sup> The creation of another autonomous state for the Arab nomadic tribes in the Syrian Jazira region in the north was briefly considered but abandoned after the Syrian Revolt.<sup>355</sup> In any case, in August 1920, General Gouraud was clearly instructed by Alexandre Millerand, the President of the Council and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to have a flexible policy vis à vis the nomadic tribes in Syria. It meant no interference in their internal affairs against two main demands – to maintain peace around the four large cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama) and open the trade routes in the desert.<sup>356</sup> Suggestions in favor of Jazirian autonomy were made up until the mid-1920s by various French officials and services, who effectively competed to have the region under their control. By 1922, however, the French High Commissioner seemed more inclined to unify different mini-states under a federation rather than creating new entities.<sup>357</sup> Although tribes were not afforded autonomy, their homeland – Syrian Jazira, soon emerged as one of the most strategic places, where the French

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<sup>351</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria, The History of An Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 153.

<sup>352</sup> Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 201.

<sup>353</sup> Khoury, *Une tutelle*, 200-206.

<sup>354</sup> The term “compact minorities” is taken from Itamar Rabinovich, “The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14:40 (1979), 693-712.

<sup>355</sup> Similar unsuccessful attempts were done by the Ottoman authorities at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was suggested to form a Desert Province. Sam Dolbee, “The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects, and Diseases in the Late Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860-1940” (Unpublished diss. New York University, 2017), 9, 113, 139.

<sup>356</sup> MAE, Serie E Levant, 1918-1929, E 313-1, télégramme N: 796 cited in Christian Velud, “Une Expérience D’administration Régionale en Syrie Durant Le Mandat Français : Conquête, Colonisation et Mise en Valeur de la Gazira, 1920-1936” [Unpublished diss. Université Lumière Lyon 2, 1991), 2:229, fn. 22.

<sup>357</sup> In 1922 two different projects were submitted to the High Commissioner. One by de Lamothe and the second by commandant Labrue, the chief of the intelligence service of Aleppo. The first suggested appointing two representatives in the borderlands – one civil and one military, while Labrue suggested having only a military one, independent of the Aleppo delegate, thus creating a service d’Affaire Indigènes with the example of Algeria. CADN-SL 2379, Note N 979/K du 1.2.1922, cited in Velud, “Une expérience” 2 :231, 233.

needed to secure their control in order to be able to keep their mandate in the rest of Syria, as we shall see later.

As for the newly created mini-states, they all had their own legislative governments in the form of Representative Councils, separate budgets, and even their own flags. Other signs of favoritism were apparent, too. Most of these communities paid lower rates of taxes and could spend more on welfare. Even the official languages were different in all these States.<sup>358</sup> It was all so exaggerated that on June 28, 1922, Aleppo, Damascus, and the Alawite territory were reunited in a Syrian Federation. On December 5, 1924, a unified Syrian State was created that included the States of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alexandretta Sanjak. It was divided into six sanjaks – Damascus, Homs, Hama, Alexandretta, Dair ez-Zor, Hawran – and the vilayet of Aleppo. Damascus was made the capital. However, this was not the last configuration, and administrative reshuffling would continue during the entire mandate period.<sup>359</sup>

The French preferred method of government was, therefore, the division of Syria into smaller administrative units based on ethnoreligious lines. It stemmed from their perception of the people of Syria as a mosaic of races and religions and from their perception of Arab nationalism as an urban-Muslim phenomenon, from which the diverse ethnoreligious communities and the rural population were to be protected.<sup>360</sup>

The vigorous French policy to avoid any unity in Syria by imposing artificial barriers between the different ethnic and religious minorities had precisely the opposite effect – a strong and widespread tendency to unite. Syrian unity, as well as the fight against the mandate, would dominate the new nationalist movement.

In addition to this partitioning, the French High Commissioner appointed French assistant delegates (“advisors”) to work with the local authorities in these states. These “advisors” effectively decided on all the important matters. In some regions, such as the Alawite and Jabal al-Druze territories as well as Jazira, Le Service de Renseignement du Levant (intelligence service) had absolute control.<sup>361</sup> The account of Munir Al-Rayyis, the prominent

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<sup>358</sup> Arabic was the only official language in Damascus and Aleppo; Arabic was the first and French the second language in Lebanon. French and Arabic were equal in Latakia and Jabal Druze, in Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 153.

<sup>359</sup> In 1924, Alawites was again separated from the Syrian State, to be reunited again in 1936. Both Alawite and Jabal al-Druze States were detached from Syria in 1939 and reunited again in 1942, while Alexandretta sanjak was ceded to Turkey in 1939, see in Khoury, *Syria and the French*, 57-59.

<sup>360</sup> Khury, *Syria*; Jean-Davis Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire: Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003); Seda Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land, and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939),” (Unpublished diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 166-167.

<sup>361</sup> Velud, “La politique mandataire française à l’égard des tribus et des zones de steppe en Syrie : l’exemple de la Djézireh,” in *Steppes d’Arabie : Etats, pasteurs, agriculteurs et commerçants : le devenir des zones sèches*, ed., Riccardo Bocco, Ronald Jaubert Françoise Métral, (Paris : PUF, 1993), 61-86.



Syrian nationalist and the editor of the Damascene *Al-Qabas* influential newspaper, is quite telling in this regard:

It became clear that the Special Officer had the last word in the region of the State of the Alawis and that the qāïmaqān (the administrative head of the district) – whose position should make him the highest official of the qadā (district) in the Syrian interior – was merely an employee of the French councillor in that state. He could not accept a complaint from the people without first submitting it to the councillor's office for agreement, so that he could consider it first, or to keep it with him, or ignore it, or personally intervene in the immediate situation. Similarly, before each day's session of court, the head of the court would explain to the intelligence officer the cases before him and listen to his personal opinion of the parties involved. The word of the councillor sometimes went beyond the (limits of) the law, but woe to whomever opposed him!<sup>362</sup>

Furthermore, the French had a policy of filling all more or less important technical, cultural, administrative, policing, and military positions with French, European, or worse, other ethnic or religious representatives known for their pro-mandate attitude. The Syrians, on the other hand, were employed in low-level positions. This policy left many well-educated Syrians from the emerging middle-class dissatisfied.<sup>363</sup> The situation was the same even in Lebanon, which was considered overwhelmingly pro-mandate. By mid-1924, nationalists in Lebanon had adopted the slogan “Lebanon for Lebanese.” The local press was against the appointment of any non-Lebanese governors. They were outraged that most of the public offices were still occupied by the Turks, Egyptians, Iraqis, and Palestinians.<sup>364</sup> This ill-planned policy, coupled with the aggressive French reorganization of Syria and micromanagement, resulted in a widespread nationalism directed at French rule. This anger was often directed toward the diverse religious and ethnic minorities who cooperated with the French authorities or were believed to do so. At times, such perceptions and anger were also directed at the incoming Christian, non-Arab-speaking Armenian refugees.

In addition, the French mandatory authorities favored other modes of sectarianism; for example, they opted for preserving the former Ottoman traditions, even further highlighting the ethnic divisions and hierarchies. This was implemented by preserving the former powers of the various religious heads as the official representatives of their communities. Moreover, it was especially visible in the electoral system, where each community was allocated a seat according

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<sup>362</sup> Munir Al-Rayyis, *Al-kitāb al-dhahabī li'l thawrāt al-wataniyya fī al-Mashriq al-Arabi: al-thawra al-sūriyya al-Kubrā* [The Golden Book of National Revolutions in the Arab East: The Great Syrian Revolt] (Beirut: Dār al-Talī'a lil Tabā'a wa l'Nashr, 1969), 113, cited in Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>363</sup> Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 213.

<sup>364</sup> “Suriakan Ardzagank: Azgaynakanutyune Libanani Mej” [Syrian Reaction: Nationalism in Lebanon], *Suriakan Mamul*, May 6, 1924, 1.

to its numeric importance. Moreover, the Ottoman practices of two-round elections were preserved, as we shall see later.

The state-sponsored sectarianism imposed from above by the French authorities strived to create a territorially unified nation-state, as shown by Ussama Makdisi in the example of Lebanon. It was a radical departure from the previous modes of government, based not so much on religious distinctions as on hierarchical politics of notability that cut across religious lines.<sup>365</sup>

Sectarianism and clientelism, however, did not mean that the French mandatory authorities tried to exclude any cooperation with the Sunni Muslims. On the contrary, since French presence in Syria, especially in Aleppo and Northern Syria, remained largely uncertain and contested for a long time, there was a need to create a larger support base by winning to their side highly respected notables who could sustain the French rule. It was, therefore, no accident that one of the leaders of the Northern Syrian uprising (1919–1921), Subhi Barakat<sup>366</sup> was appointed first as the head of the Aleppo Representative Council and later to the Syrian Federal Council. However, Subhi Barakat was by no means the only notable who opted for cooperation with the French. Rashid Khalidi explained such cooperation in the following terms:

There were wide spectrum (sic) of modes of relating to this late form of colonialism, running from collaboration to cooperation, to accommodation, to ignoring the colonizer where possible, to non-cooperation, to passive resistance, to public protest, and finally to armed resistance...with individuals and groups sometimes moving back and forth along the spectrum.<sup>367</sup>

If such cooperation with the locals was essential to secure a solid ground for the French rule, it was not enough since other, much bigger obstacles remained. One such obstacle was the Turkish propaganda that, despite the Ankara agreement, was extremely effective, especially in Aleppo and Northern Syria. Turkish propaganda was also believed to be a key factor hindering the advance of the French troops in the Syrian Upper Jazira up until 1926.<sup>368</sup> This propaganda, by no means, was limited to Jazira alone. In fact, Kemalist Turkey, after its victory over the

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<sup>365</sup> Ussama Makdisi, “Reconstructing the Nation-State: The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon,” *Middle East Report*, 200 (1996), 23-26, 24.

<sup>366</sup> His biography was printed in *Suriakan Mamul* taken from the *Al-Taqqaddum*. His father had been the Alepine deputy in the Ottoman parliament, Subhi himself studied at St. Joseph (Beirut) and Sultaniye (Istanbul), spoke Arabic, French and Turkish. He had been elected as a deputy in the Municipal Council of Aleppo in 1911. Noteworthily, *Suriakan Mamul* expressed much joy and satisfaction for his appointment, obviously Subhi had been someone known to the Armenians previously. “Subhi Bey Barakat,” *Suriakan Mamul*, August 24, 1922, 1.

<sup>367</sup> Rashid Khalidi, “Concluding Remarks,” in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, ed., Peter Sluglett and Nadine Meéouchy, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 703.

<sup>368</sup> Jordi Tejel, “Un territoire de marge en haute Djézireh syrienne (1921-1940),” *Études rurales*, N :186, 2010, 61-76 ; Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Bern : Peter Lang, 2007), 360; Tashjian, *La France en Cilicie*, chapter 9, 301-328.

Greeks, set an objective to claim all the Turkish territories based on the “Turkish National Pact,” which included Alexandretta, Antioch, Aleppo, and the entire left bank of the Euphrates. Therefore, one of the first French actions was to secure a foothold in Aleppo and Northern Syria, an initiative in which the Armenian refugees played an important role.

### **French policies and the Armenian refugees**

Much like other colonial enterprises, one aspect of the French Mandate in Syria was the task of “modernization,” entrusting the mandatory authorities with a so-called “civilizing mission.” The “civilizing mission” became one of the most important features of French governance in Syria and Lebanon, giving colonial authorities both an ideal of “modernization” and political leverage. Hence, French authorities embarked on large public works almost everywhere, especially in Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut, due to the presence of a large refugee population, which offered a cheap and abundant labor force. Many refugees were called upon to work for a modest payment. However, the uncertainty and insecurity made it difficult for these refugees to commit to their employment. The French delegate complained that some projects started with as many as 400 volunteers but were forced to close down on only the fifth day as only 30 men showed up. The situation was the same for agricultural work; for example, a few big landowners asked for up to 100 Greek families to help them with the harvest, but no one expressed interest. In fact, the French delegate concluded that because some *fellahs* (peasants) had reportedly announced that they would not tolerate any Christian gatherings around their cities, no refugee dared leave the town and enter the isolated villages.<sup>369</sup> This was true even for Aleppo; refugees were reluctant to settle down and look for employment. For example, one of the notables from the Al-Jabri family looked for 35 families to settle on his lands as cultivators but found only four. Similarly, Kamil Al-Kudsi, who was looking for a gardener and a wine cultivator, found no one.<sup>370</sup> Father Harutunian told the French delegate openly that no Armenian wished to settle in Syria permanently; instead, they were all eager to leave for the USA.<sup>371</sup> Indeed, thousands of refugees left for the North and South Americas within a short period.<sup>372</sup> Armenian leaders, both religious and lay, were eager to facilitate the transfer of these refugees. Favorable immigration policies in the South and North Americas contributed to the trend.

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<sup>369</sup> CADN-SL 966, Rapport sur l'exode des chrétiens d'Anatolie et de Cilicie en Syrie, 14 mars 1923.

<sup>370</sup> CADN-SL 966, Le délégué-adjoint du Haut-Commiss., “Rapport, les refugies arméniens à Alep,” 3 mars 1923.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Richard Hovannisian, “The Ebb and Flow of the Armenian Minority in the Arab Middle East,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 28:1 (1974), 19-32.

However, things were to change radically as of 1924 due to more restrictive policies and quotas in the USA.<sup>373</sup>

In the meantime, naturally, such a situation was contrary to the French efforts to create major public works with cheap refugee labor. Thus, to succeed, the French needed to ensure that the refugees felt secure and settled. As early as mid-February 1923, a special commission comprising the local notables was formed in Aleppo on the initiative of the French delegate to study the refugee needs and list their professions. The first meeting of this commission was held on February 15, 1923.<sup>374</sup> The example of Damascus undoubtedly inspired the French delegate. In March 1923, there were about 10,869 refugees in this city, none living at French expense; they were all employed in public works. Moreover, within a short time, they not only became self-sufficient but were in the position to support their family members in Turkey entirely through their earnings.<sup>375</sup> Excited by this “remarkable example” the French delegate advised the High Commissioner to transfer the refugees in smaller groups of 150–200 persons to Damascus, Homs, and Hama. However, the High Commissioner did not share this opinion and was convinced that Homs and Hama were unsuitable since no native Christians lived there and no major public works were foreseen. Instead, he insisted on transferring them to coastal cities in Syria and Lebanon, where a substantial number of Christians resided and major public works were underway.<sup>376</sup>

The improvements in the major cities were important in terms of prestige and representation to the outside world, which the French authorities took seriously. The French officials saw the promotion of tourism as a means to prove that the country was being developed (*mise en valeur*) according to the LoN’s requirements for a mandate tutelage.<sup>377</sup>

In this regard, refugee camps were a major challenge that needed to be addressed. Most of these camps were on the outskirts of the big towns in Syria and Lebanon and were constructed from random materials. The camp known as Quarantina on the outskirts of Beirut was especially miserable. Its shanty houses lay on the city’s outskirts, covering the space between the sea and the railway. The railway divided the camp into “A” and “B” sections. This

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<sup>373</sup>On these quotas, see Torrie Hester, *Deportation: The Origins of U.S. policy* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Dan Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); For a discussion of the transnational elements of the practice of deportation in the interwar period, see Emily Pope-Obeda, “National Expulsions in a Transnational World: The Global Dimensions of American Deportation Practice, 1920–1935,” in *Deportation in the Americas: Histories of Exclusion and Resistance*, ed., Kenyon Zimmer et al. (College Station, TX, 2018), 18–49. Chris Gratien et al., “The Second Exchange: Ottoman Greeks and the American Deportation State during the 1930s,” *Journal of Migration History*, 6 (2020), 104–128.

<sup>374</sup> CADN-SL 966, Le délégué-adjoint du Haut-Commiss., “Rapport, les refugies arméniens à Alep,” 3 mars 1923.

<sup>375</sup> CADN-SL 966, Le délégué-adjoint du Haut-Commiss de Damas à Le Haut-Commiss., 21 mars 1923.

<sup>376</sup> CADN-SL 966, Le Haut-Commissaire à Lamothe, Le délégué-adjoint à Alep, secret, 18 mars 1923.

<sup>377</sup> Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), 76.

location close to the railway and the highway connecting Beirut with Tripoli made the camp much more visible. In fact, it was right on the spot where French and foreign travelers arrived and departed. As one French official reported, it gave an unfortunate impression and negated all the French efforts for tourism development.<sup>378</sup>

*Suriakan Mamul* regularly reported the arrival of many tourists and the local efforts undertaken to host them. The paper was also positive and enthusiastic about the huge public works underway, including the construction of roads, tram lines, new buildings, drinking water pumps, electrification, and highways connecting the city with the regions and villages. The paper did not omit to mention how, during the War, free labor provided by Armenian refugees was used by the Ottoman army to solve the problem of drinking water in Aleppo.<sup>379</sup>

Refugee camps, on the other hand, were growing at a remarkable speed. The one in Beirut had grown from 130 to 580 tents within a single year and to 2,150 by 1924. It resembled a small town with a population of about 12–13,000 refugees; small dirt paths; a church; a hospital with its own doctor, pharmacist, and dentist; schools; and a market with more than 500 shops.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid. 75-81.

<sup>379</sup> Editorial, "Halep Qaghakin Barekargume" [The Improv. of Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 18, 1924, 2

<sup>380</sup> "Ptuyt Me Beiruti Haykakan Campin Mej" [Visiting the Armenian Camp of Beirut], *Pyunik*, 21 May 1923, 2.

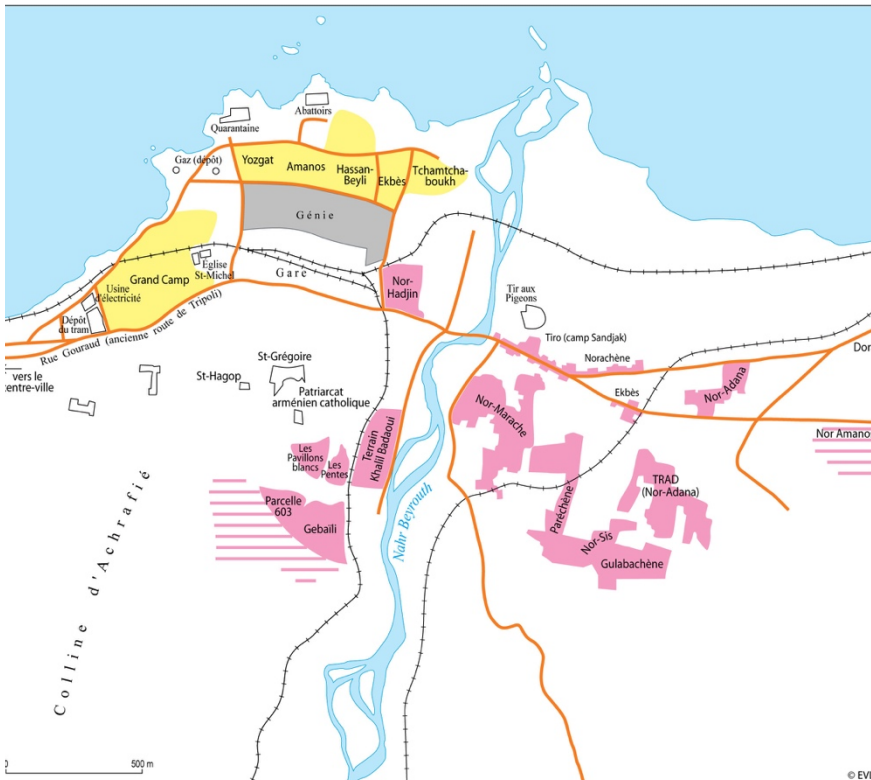


Figure 4. Armenian refugee camps and new neighborhoods in Beirut. Source: Vahé Tachjian, “Des camps de réfugiés aux quartiers urbains: processus et enjeux” (Beirut: Presses de l’Université Saint-Joseph, 2007), 120.



Figure 5. Armenian refugee camp in Beirut. Source: Bibliothèque Orientale – Université Saint Joseph, Lebanon.

The local press was highly vocal about the refugee camps on the outskirts of the major cities, and local authorities sought ways to control or eliminate them. For example, *Suriakan Mamul* reported that, in Beirut, the locals did not wish to see the dirty, poor camp on the outskirts of their city anymore.<sup>381</sup> It also reported that the governor of Beirut had consultations in order to find a suitable settlement site for the Armenian refugees,<sup>382</sup> Husein Ahrabbe, the head of Beirut city administration, reportedly suggested combining the camps in a single place to be controlled directly by the government.<sup>383</sup>

Many landowners, in their turn, were eager to regain their properties. They had ceded the lands on the understanding that the occupation was temporary. However, the continuous refugee flow not only made the camps considerably larger but also worried the landowners.<sup>384</sup> When the first refugees began to arrive from Cilicia at the beginning of 1922, Melkonian appealed to Najib Trahid, a prominent local landowner, to provide a site for the camp, which he willingly did free of charge. Until 1924, the landowner did not ask for money. Afterward, he demanded 1,975 Turkish lira). The local government, too, issued an order (N:109) bringing the camp under local supervision as a temporary settlement.<sup>385</sup>

This was followed by a suggestion from NER to transfer Armenian refugees from Beirut port to the countryside, where they would be far from the spotlight and could become self-sufficient much quicker. After all, the refugees could not count on permanent charity. Notably, NER, which was also active in Soviet Armenia, had experimented there with the establishment of agricultural colonies to make the refugees self-sufficient while producing crops and meat to help the Armenian economy.<sup>386</sup> Later, we shall see how these experiments inspired the French in their refugee settlement projects in Syria and Lebanon.

The first refugee settlements were either created spontaneously or with indirect French encouragement that went hand-in-hand with French efforts to establish security in Northern Syria. Before any organized refugee settlement could occur, security had to be achieved and French rule firmly established, especially in Aleppo and Northern Syria. Here too, refugees had a role to play, either directly or indirectly. In later chapters, we shall see the connection between the establishment of French rule and the refugee settlements. This will also reveal the processes

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<sup>381</sup> “Kemperu Masin,” [About the Camps], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 4, 1923, 1.

<sup>382</sup> “Hay Gaghtakanneru Hamar Tuner” [Houses for the Arm. Refugees], *Suriakam Mamul*, January 13, 1924, 3.

<sup>383</sup> “Kemperu Hskoghutyune Ughaki Karavarakan Mijotcnerov” [The Camps to be Controlled Directly by the Government], *Suriakan Mamul*, July 31, 1924, 3.

<sup>384</sup> Editorial, “Rami Kempe” [The Ram Camp], *Suriakam Mamul*, May 20, 1924, 2.

<sup>385</sup> “Tesakutyunes Kemperu Tenorinutyun Andamnerin Meki Het” [Meeting with A member in The Camp Administration], *Pyunik* August 27, 1924, 1.

<sup>386</sup> “Erkragsutyune Hayastani Mej” [Agriculture in Armenia], *Suriakan Mamul*, September 13, 1923, 1.

by which Armenian refugees came increasingly to be viewed by the Syrians (and certain scholars) as those who sustained the French rule.

### **Winning the propaganda battle, securing Aleppo and the Syrian Jazira**

In the early 1920s, economic conditions worsened in Aleppo as they had elsewhere in Syria. Trade was stalled, and the Syrian-Turkish border remained closed. *Suriakan Mamul* even compared the situation to that of the War years, 1915–1918.<sup>387</sup> In Aleppo, there were persistent rumors that the city would be returned to Turkey.<sup>388</sup> In addition, there were public demonstrations against the French Mandate in both Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>389</sup> Against this background, in September 1922, the Alepines hosted a high-level French guest, Le Nail, a member of a delegation that had arrived in Syria to study the local economic conditions, trade opportunities, communication systems, and tariffs.<sup>390</sup> Le Nail proudly announced that France was there to guarantee the wishes of the Alepines, promote their trade, develop their agriculture, and ensure religious freedoms.<sup>391</sup> None of these promises were to happen overnight, however, and most Alepines continued to be receptive to the Turkish propaganda encouraging them to fight the imposed Christian rule. This propaganda was not openly anti-French; rather, it sought to direct the anger and frustration of the Syrians towards the incoming Armenian refugees, who were not only held responsible for the French presence in Syria but also for helping sustain such a presence.

*Suriakan Mamul's* reporter in Beirut claimed that, after the Cilician evacuation, the new Turkish leaders toured Syria and Lebanon, inciting the local population against the Armenians. He thought that such efforts were behind the petition signed by the Damascenes demanding that the High Commissioner should remove the Armenians from Syria.<sup>392</sup> Notably, the petition had mentioned that the Damascenes did not wish to complain against the Armenians, but the current economic conditions obliged them to do so.<sup>393</sup>

The *Suriakan Mamul* especially highlighted a prolonged visit to Beirut by Muheddin Pasha, the governor of Adana. Ostensibly, on a mission to discuss customs-related issues, he

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<sup>387</sup> Editorial, “Metahogich Tentcumner” [Worrisome Crisis], *Suriakan Mamul*, September 3, 1922, 1.

<sup>388</sup> On the role of the rumors, see Tejel, “States of Rumors. Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925-1945,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* Vol. 37:1, (2020), 95-113.

<sup>389</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921–1923, From Melonian to Noratunkian, July 15, 1922.

<sup>390</sup> Abbé E. Wetterlé, *En Syrie avec le général Gouraud*, 12.

<sup>391</sup> “M. LeNail-I Tjare” [Le Nail’s Speech (in Aleppo)], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 8, 1922, 2.

<sup>392</sup> Taron Urugtsi, “Derdogh Mate” [The Inciting Finger], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 31, 1922, 1-2.

<sup>393</sup> Sirak, “Damaskosi Hay Keanken” [Armenian life in Damascus], *Suriakan Mamul* October 14, 1923, 1.



actively met with local notables.<sup>394</sup> Moreover, after his return to Adana, he declared that “Syrians are waiting impatiently the return of the Turks, in order to obtain independence under the Turkish protection. It is the Armenians who are against the return of the Turks and who wish to keep the French mandate instead.”<sup>395</sup> Similar articles were also published in the newspapers of Aleppo, Damascus, and Alexandretta. In this way, an attempt was being made to show that the Armenian refugees were the primary reason for the French presence and the main obstacle to independence.

The situation in Aleppo remained alarming and uncertain for a long time. Father Nerses Tavugchian reported to Beirut that the French troops had retreated while the Turkish ones had advanced and that there was an urgent need to remove the refugees from Aleppo.<sup>396</sup> In November 1922, Melkonian appealed to Paris for advice, stating that the pitiful condition of the refugees in Aleppo required immediate action. Earlier, Father Nerses Tavugchian and Father Harutyunian had reported that red marks had been put on the doors of the Armenians and that the local government also seemed to be against them. Bayard Dodge, an NER coordinator, had toured the city and confirmed the news. This notwithstanding, the French forbade any massive displacement of refugees from Aleppo to Lebanon for several reasons. In particular, the French wished to avoid angering the local Muslim population, who were against the Christian-imposed rule, any further, or to incur additional costs.<sup>397</sup> Soon, it became clear that Melkonian had an agreement with influential Lebanese actors to discreetly transfer the refugees from Aleppo to Lebanon, on the condition that they were settled in the mountainous regions and not in overcrowded Beirut and Tripoli. The plan was to organize the move in small groups of up to eight families to avoid attention.<sup>398</sup>

In fact, from the very beginning, Aleppo did not figure as a favorite settlement location for the DNA, Melkonian, or the French. Instead, preference was given to the coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Latakia or interior cities such as Damascus, Homs, and Hama. The French delegate in Aleppo, for example, suggested keeping just 4,000 refugees in Aleppo and dispersing the others. He suggested sending 5,000 further to the northwest, to Antioch and Idlib, and 10,000 to France, following the example of the USA. He argued that Armenians were

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<sup>394</sup> MAE, vol. 50/208, # 145; Rapport du capitaine Gros de Vaid, du service des renseignements, Alep, 13 septem. 1925.

<sup>395</sup> DNA, folder Letters to Melkonian, from Sahag II to Noratunkian, Confidential, Paris, February 17, 1923.

<sup>396</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921–1923; from Tavugchian to Melkonian, (handwritten), Aleppo, October 12, 1922.

<sup>397</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921–1923; from Melkonian to Noratunkian, November 15, 1922.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

famous for being good at languages, hardworking, and family-orientated, and would be easily absorbed in France.<sup>399</sup>

At the beginning of February 1923, alarming letters arrived from Aleppo. Father Tavugchian informed Melkonian that the strong anti-Armenian sentiment in Aleppo that had lasted for several months was now reduced but had not entirely disappeared. He was still of the opinion that propaganda defaming the Armenians continued to be spread by Turkish agents to empty Syria of Armenian refugees.<sup>400</sup> This was nothing new, of course. The other news that he shared was more surprising. He reported that the French authorities had started building fortifications around Aleppo but refused to provide any explanation. Moreover, they had created irregular armed groups on the Syrian-Turkish border, who crossed the border and spread fear on the other side. What was particularly unusual was the fact that these bands were primarily composed of Armenians. The newspapers in Kilis had already reported this development. Tavugchian warned that any Armenian intervention in the Muslim lands would not be regarded well by the Syrians and might even become a reason for the expulsion of the entire refugee community.<sup>401</sup>

How to explain this strange French policy shortly after the Cilicia evacuation? Why were the fragile refugees armed once again and deployed in the borderlands if the prior experience of the Legion had been “a crime, and a mistake?” Were the French authorities attempting to make the Armenians victims again and justify their mandate based on the need to ensure security and stability? Was it meant to ensure the loyalty of the Armenians by making them understand that they were fragile and only the French could protect them? The answers to these questions are partially given in Melkonian’s long explanatory letter to Paris. He reported that he and Sahak II had been summoned to the High Commissioner’s office at the beginning of February 1923, where they were informed about an imminent Turkish attack. Carlier had revealed the High Commissioner’s plans to appeal to the Armenian refugees in Aleppo and Alexandretta, secretly arming about 1,000 men. He explained that it was necessary in case Turkish irregulars, who had been active recently in the border area, reached Aleppo and Alexandretta. Moreover, the need for primarily Armenian armed groups in Syria was justified because Armenians would undoubtedly be the first victims, and there were not enough French forces to protect them. Further, they were informed that the French administrator of Northern

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<sup>399</sup> CADN-SL 966, Rapport sur l’exode des chrétiens d’Anatolie et de Cilicie en Syrie, 14 mars 1923.

<sup>400</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921–1923, from Tavugchian to Melkonian, Aleppo, February 6, 1923.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

Syria (commandant des territoires Nord de Syrie), General Billotte, and Captain Hrant Maloyan in Alexandretta had, in fact, already started recruitment.<sup>402</sup>

This news did not surprise either Sahak II or Melkonian. They were both, nevertheless, categorically against any such move. They argued that it would endanger the lives of those Armenians still in Turkey as well as those of the refugees. Besides, even if there was such a danger, it was for the Syrians to defend their homeland and not for the Armenians.<sup>403</sup> An urgent meeting had been convened in Aleppo, where it was decided not to allow the formation of any irregular forces composed of Armenians, to forbid any young Armenian men from joining the Syrian and Lebanese gendarmerie or other regular forces, and advise Armenians to avoid participating in defense in the event of an attack. In the meantime, efforts were made to remove the refugees from Aleppo. The Alawites region, where Cayla was the governor, had been identified as a suitable area because the Armenians had historically been on good terms with the Alawites.<sup>404</sup> The DNA was pleased to report in its response that all the efforts had been positive and that the Turkish newspapers in Istanbul had already started reporting “the wise measures taken by the Syrian government to disarm the populations around the borderland.”<sup>405</sup> Moreover, official denials of such Armenian armed groups were published in the Turkish newspapers by the French High Commissioner in Istanbul.<sup>406</sup> This new technique, encouraging the spread of rumors then denying them (or not), would later be used by the French to put pressure on the Armenians and, at times, make them victims, especially in situations where the denial did not appear or was delayed – as it was the case during the Syrian Revolt. For a long time after the events in Cilicia, the Armenians did not trust the French and were sure that if not the whole of Syria, at least its northern parts would be ceded to Turkey sooner or later.

According to the American consul in Aleppo, a guerrilla war was promoted by Turkey to create a favorable public opinion for the Turkish demands (for Aleppo, Alexandretta, and Antioch) to the border commission established after the Lausanne Treaty. Moreover, the same report claimed that Turkey did not intend to limit its claims to these regions but to initiate anti-French propaganda in inland Syria too (Homs, Hama, and Damascus), with the aim of limiting French influence in Lebanon.<sup>407</sup> Interestingly, the report revealed that, as a response, the French had armed a few thousand Druze and deployed them along the Syrian-Turkish border. Being

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<sup>402</sup> DNA, folder, Melkonian 1921–1923, From Melkonian to Noratunkian, February 12, 1923 (handwritten).

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921–1923, from Tavugchian to Melkonian, Aleppo, February 6, 1923.

<sup>406</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921–1923, From Noratunkian to Melkonian, March 27, 1923.

<sup>407</sup> NARA, American Confidential Consular files, N:464 (1 of 2) from Knabenshue to Washington, May 27, 1924.

neither Christian nor Muslim, the Druze were an appropriate choice for such a task.<sup>408</sup> No doubt, after failing to recruit among the Armenian refugees, the French had turned to the Druze. The American consul was convinced that if Aleppo was ceded, it would create a new scenario of constant disturbance in pursuit of the recovery of the remainder of Syria.<sup>409</sup>

The danger of the handover of northern Syria and Aleppo to Turkey seemed so real that General Gouraud had privately given assurances to the panic-stricken Armenian refugee leaders. De Laporte, for his part, had told the head of DNA that, even if France were to leave Syria, its mandate would be given to another country. In all cases, there would be enough time to evacuate the refugees if necessary.<sup>410</sup> In the meantime, *Suriakan Mamul* reported that Armenian refugees were being transferred discreetly and free of charge from Aleppo to Damascus, Tarabulus, Alexandretta, and Latakia by the French authorities.<sup>411</sup>

### **Anti-mandate propaganda and the Armenians**

At the beginning of 1923, a major incident in the Armenian refugee camp of Beirut had an important impact on French-Armenian relations. It was then that the French mandatory authorities realized that all the Turkish intrigues in Syria and Lebanon were not only intended to turn the locals against the Armenian refugees but also the French. Moreover, a systematic and deliberate attempt was being made by the Turkish propaganda to link the unwanted French mandate with the presence of the Christian refugees in a way that one justified the other. Since the Turkish challenge was common, a surprisingly supportive French attitude towards the refugees soon became apparent.

In January 1923, two police agents without uniforms stormed the Armenian camp on a Sunday afternoon, initiating a fight, wounding many, and killing one. Worse, however, was the arrest of about 600–700 men from the refugee camp who were chained and paraded in the streets of Beirut. Although almost everyone had been released by evening, it had made a bad

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>409</sup> NARA, American Confidential Consular files, N:464 (1 of 2) “Political Situation in Aleppo,” May 15, 1924. A few years later, during the Syrian Revolt, the American consul would change his mind suggesting giving Aleppo and Alexandretta to Turkey, based on the fact that “economically speaking they are Turkish and not Syrian.” Moreover, that arrangement would give Turkey the entire railway from Alexandretta to Jerablus and would end the unpleasant incidents that were constantly occurring... it was also considered better to replace the undesirable French mandate with a British one. See in NARA, Confidential Files 1926 January to 1 March, Consular Posts Beirut, Volume 466.

<sup>410</sup> DNA archives, from the national delegation to Melkonian, Lausanne, December 11, 1922.

<sup>411</sup> “Gaghtakanneru Teghavorum” [Settlement of the Refugees], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 4, 1923, 2.

impression on the locals.<sup>412</sup> Armenian leaders believed the incident was staged to present the Armenian refugees as troublesome criminals, thus provoking the hostility of the local people against them.<sup>413</sup> De Caix, the secretary of the French High Commissioner, who suddenly became unusually supportive of the refugees, agreed with this view. According to him, the real goal behind this affair had been the creation of a political incident to discredit the mandate and damage French prestige. Thus, Colonel Bucheton, the intelligence chief of Greater Lebanon, was tasked with closely monitoring the situation and the refugee camp.<sup>414</sup> Similarly, Sahak II was convinced that there was a direct link between the incident, the ongoing Lausanne negotiations, and the talks on the Armenian “national home.”<sup>415</sup> He argued that the forces behind it had sought first of all to discredit the French by showing that French presence, as well as the French policy of hosting refugees, had altered the established balance in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>416</sup> It seemed that the former French policy vis-à-vis Faysal – staging incidents to discredit his rule – was now skillfully employed against the French by the Turkish agents.

This incident was by no means an isolated one. On another occasion, 4,000 Egyptian sterling was stolen somewhere in Beirut. Once again, Armenian refugees were immediately accused, and the camp was searched by the police, resulting in hundreds of arrests. An unusual feature of this case was that the police had come all the way from Adana. What is more, it turned out that they had a list of names and searched for specific persons. Indeed, most of the wanted men were those who had cooperated with the French forces in Cilicia. As with the first incident, the arrested men were chained and paraded in the streets of Beirut.<sup>417</sup>

Notably, after receiving this alarming news from Beirut, Noratunkian met with both de Caix and General Gouraud in Paris, where both sides decided to join forces to fight Turkish propaganda. Moreover, such propaganda was now against Armenian refugees and the French presence in Syria. French officials agreed to forbid all kinds of anti-Armenian propaganda in the local press as well as prevent the Turkish press from entering territories under the mandate.<sup>418</sup> General Gouraud confirmed the French decision to preserve the mandate, under which Armenians would have nothing to fear.<sup>419</sup> In this light, Noratunkian advised Melkonian

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<sup>412</sup> Everyone but 14 men were released. Later, they were also released. The defense of the detained was performed by the Lebanese lawyer Emil Eddé, who would become the president of Lebanon in 1936, see “Beyruti 28 Hayeru Datavarutyune” [The Court Hearing of the 28 Arrested Armenians in Beirut], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 28, 1923, 3.

<sup>413</sup> DNA, Melkonian 1921-1923, confidential, From Sahak II to Noratunkian, Paris, February 17, 1923.

<sup>414</sup> Details on this incident, see in DNA, Melkonian 1921-1923, from Sahak II to Noratunkian, March 11, 1923.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid, February 17, 1923.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> CADN-SL 966, General Gouraud, Le Haut-Commissaire à Robert de Caix, personnelle “Reception de Gabriel Effendi Noradounghian,” Paris, 18 février 1923.

<sup>418</sup> DNA Melkonian 1921-1923, From Noratunkian to Melkonian, February 17, 1923.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

to invite all the refugees to keep calm and *keep trusting the French authorities as they had done until now*; and, above all, to keep *friendly relations with the locals*. As a result of these efforts, they hoped to attract the sympathy of both the local government and the local people. Noratunkian hoped for “a good future for our Armenians in Syria and Lebanon.”<sup>420</sup>

French diplomatic archives contain a whole folder of Turkish propaganda disseminated mainly through newspapers, which were sent to Syria with the help of the smugglers and distributed in large numbers free of charge. While the intelligence reported on the formation of irregular forces almost everywhere in Syria (Aleppo, Alexandretta, Antioch, Homs, Hama, and Jiser Al-Shaghur), the process was especially active in Aleppo, where the locals were persuaded that the arrival of the Turks was imminent. The report also cited the famous satirical paper of Turkey, *Karaguz*, which published the following dialogue. One person says, “I love Istanbul so much that I cannot leave it,” while the other replies, “I love Istanbul, Aleppo, and Damascus so much that I will not be able to leave them.”<sup>421</sup> Another confidential French intelligence report stated clearly that Turkish propaganda was particularly strong in Alexandretta and Aleppo; however, better results were achieved in the latter due to the historical ties between Aleppo and Anatolia. It was very easy for any Turkish person holding a valid passport to arrive in Syria and circulate freely.<sup>422</sup> This propaganda was based on the pan-Islamic feeling that the Kemalist government was the liberator of the Muslim nations. Reportedly, a letter signed by Kemal had arrived in Aleppo, which read, “in order to liberate Arabs from the French yoke and save them from the destiny of the Senegalese, I recommend Syrians to start a national movement for their own cause.”<sup>423</sup>

In the main cities of Syria and Lebanon, such propaganda was spread via several pan-Islamic committees like the Committee of the Red Crescent (headquartered in Beirut) and the Turkish and Arab Committees (both in Aleppo) that received instructions from Kilis (the latter, in turn, received instructions from Ankara).<sup>424</sup> The Turkish Committee of Aleppo was also referred to under the telling title “Defense Committee for the National Rights of Aleppo.” At the beginning of April 1923, the French arrested some of its members and confiscated important documents revealing plans to occupy Aleppo after “having massacred the French,” as well as evidence of “tchété recruiting offices on the other side of the border” (tchétés were irregular

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid. (Highlighted by the author).

<sup>421</sup> MAE, vol. 50/208, #134-136, Weygand à Le président du conseil et le ministre des affaires étrangères.

<sup>422</sup> MAE, vol. 50/208 # 138, Rapport d’informateur, N:79, Confidential, Alep, 27 juillet 1923.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Cited in Velud “Une expérience,” 1:159, fn. 280.

bands of armed civilians).<sup>425</sup> The French consul in Cilicia reported to the High Commissioner that, even after the Ankara agreement, the Turks were not sympathetic towards the French and referred to the French presence in the region as the “French yoke.” Tchétés were being formed everywhere. The one in Adana reportedly had as many as 500 members.<sup>426</sup> It was during this time that *Jumhuriyet* published an article about a secret Armenian association in Bulgaria, which the Armenians of Istanbul supported and which aimed to take revenge on the Turks.<sup>427</sup>

French intelligence managed to infiltrate the ranks of the Turkish Committee of Aleppo. On September 12, 1923, committee members were arrested, and a great number of weapons, as well as secret communications, were confiscated.<sup>428</sup> It was discovered that three different committees were active in Aleppo, all of them fighting against the French mandate; specifically, the Turkish committee run from Kilis, the Arab Faysalian committee of “Red Hands,” and “Aman Islam.”<sup>429</sup> Many other agents were active, especially in the Upper Jazira, where a certain Captain Ismail Haqqi Qunduz had become a real headache for the French authorities. All the propaganda produced the desired results because the French ambassador in Istanbul soon reported that the Turkish press had started to publish articles about 95% of Alepines being behind the re-attachment of Aleppo to Turkey and suggested the need for a permanent Turkish representative in Beirut, who would send accurate information to Istanbul.<sup>430</sup>

Arguably, the French authorities thought that the British were behind the Red Hands, as well as another committee called Wahideddine, which was active in Aleppo, and other parts of Syria (Antioch and Aintab) and also in Iraq, Hejaz, Adana, and Konya. The idea of this latter committee was the establishment of a Syrian-Iraqi-Hejaz Arab state, presumably under British influence.<sup>431</sup> Other intelligence reports informed Paris about the doubtful actions of the British consuls of Aleppo and Damascus, as well as anti-French propaganda put out by the American University of Beirut and, finally, about the congress of all Anglo-American institutions in Syria and Lebanon held in the summer of 1923 in Lebanon.<sup>432</sup> It was believed that the congress aimed to unify Anglo-American efforts by collaborating on humanitarian activities in Syria and Lebanon in order to fight against the Catholic efforts with greater success and undermine Catholic and French influence. Furthermore, it was believed that efforts were made to create

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<sup>425</sup> According to the French intelligence, the recruiters received a weapon and 10 Ottoman gold liras per month.

<sup>426</sup> CADN-SL 996 Note de Barth de Sandfort, Consul de France (Adana) à le Haut-Commissaire, 1 juillet 1923.

<sup>427</sup> CADN-SL 573, Rensigenement, La presse turque et les comités arménieny, N: 1484, 23 décembre 1924.

<sup>428</sup> MAE, vol. 50/208, # 145-147 ; Rapport du capitaine Gros de Vaid, Alep, 13 Septembre 1923.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> MAE, vol. 50/208, #210, Telegramme, Du Mougins, Angora, Constantinople, 26 septembre 1923.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid, # 156, # 160, Annexe 3, La main de anglais à Alep et en Syrie, the list of the members is attached.

<sup>432</sup> MAE, vol- 50/208, # 171, Du Haut-Commissaire à son excellence monsieur le president du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, “Des menées anglaises en Syrie,” Alep, 3 septembre 1923.

anti-French feelings among the Muslims and non-Catholics, by targeting Muslims and the Druze (a list of names was attached).<sup>433</sup> The report not only confirmed the existence of a British intelligence network in Syria but also provided some names, among them three Armenians.<sup>434</sup>

In addition to the Turkish and British actors, there was also the Syrian-Palestinian committee, whose members were also against the French Mandate. The Syrian-Palestinian committee was formed in 1921 by a group of Syrian and Palestinian exiles to influence the terms of the mandate. Its members included some of the most prominent Arab intellectuals of the time; Michel Luftallah (the congress president), Muhammed Rashid Rida (vice-president), and Emir Shakib Arslan (secretary-general). Shakib Arslan, in particular, was famous for his commitments to the pan-Islamic cause.<sup>435</sup> According to him, Arabs from Morocco to Iraq could only free themselves from the yoke of the West by uniting in the name of the common religion. He was also famous for his pro-Turkish attitude and Turkish connections. He was often in Turkey and was in close contact with the opposition players of “Union and Progress,” including Dr. Nazim, Kara Kemal, and Ubeid Ullah.

In fact, during this period, the most contentious press campaign against the Armenian refugees did not happen in Syria and Lebanon but elsewhere, in the Turkish press and, to a lesser extent, the Iraqi press. As well as articles about the Armenian irregular bands that operated in the borderland with the knowledge of French, there were many other articles too. For example, the *Vakit* (*Time*) newspaper of Istanbul printed a piece of fabricated news that Armenian sugar traders of Beirut had sent 20,000 kg of sugar to Adana to poison the Turks.<sup>436</sup> Needless to say, there were no Armenian sugar traders in Beirut. Another Iraqi newspaper claimed that there were 60,000 Armenians in Mesopotamia, out of which 10,000 could be armed and set to conquer Mesopotamia. It also claimed that Armenians had offended the Muslims and desecrated their tombs.<sup>437</sup> It is worth noting that in Mesopotamia, there were barely 10,000 Armenian refugees.

Turkish provocations did not only aim to turn the Syrian Arab attitude hostile towards the Armenian refugees. They also tried to incite a fight between the Armenian refugees and the local Jewish community of Aleppo by spreading a rumor that an Armenian refugee boy was

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid, #197, Annexe II, service de propagande et renseignement anglais. The names were Elian in the Aziziye (Aleppo), Hekimian in Saliba (Aleppo), Karapet Bizdiguian, a former policeman of Adana in Alexandretta.

<sup>435</sup> MAE vol. 50/208, #276, Renseignement, secret, 19 décembre 1925. Arslan was also famous as “The Prince of Eloquence” for his work as a historian, poet, and journalist. More on him, Raja Adal, “Constructing Transnational Islam: The East-West Network of Shakib Arslan,” in *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World: Transmission, Transformation, Communication*, ed., Stéphan Dudoignon, et al. (London: Routledge, 2006), 176-210.

<sup>436</sup> “Hay Shakaragortsneré” [The Armenian Sugar Traders], *Suriakan Mamul*, July 1, 1923, 3.

<sup>437</sup> “Hayerun Dem Halatsank Mijaketki Mej” [Anti-Arm. Propaganda in Iraq], *Suriakan Mamul*, July, 8, 1923, 4.



murdered by the Alepine Jewish community.<sup>438</sup> Many articles in the Armenian and Syrian press were devoted to this fake news. *Fata al-Arab*, as well as the French authorities, dismissed the news as a mere rumor,<sup>439</sup> while *Suriakan Mamul* published a lengthy article in which the author showed that Armenians and Jews had shared many similarities throughout history.<sup>440</sup>

On June 23, 1924, the *Altun Yoz* paper of Adana published that the French, in order to hide their activities in Aleppo, had invited former *komitaje* heads for cooperation. Sahak II, for example, had arrived in Aleppo to arrange the enlisting of the Armenian men as soldiers, who were then sent to Jarablus, Meidan Ekbess, and Kirik Khan. The Catholicos had every interest in doing so since he wished to reconquer Cilicia.<sup>441</sup> *Suriakan Mamul* lamented that the real goal of the Turkish articles about the imaginary Armenian soldiers on the Syrian border had only one aim, which was to turn the French, as well as the Syrian hosts, against the Armenians. These regular “attacks” on the Armenians were a clear expression of the fear that the Armenians would be able to reconquer Cilicia one day. To prevent it, Turkish propaganda machine strived to send them away from Syria. However, it was useless to try to paint them with a political color, for they were mainly busy earning their daily bread.<sup>442</sup>

We learn from a complaint submitted to the Quai d’Orsay by the Ligue Française pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen, that the French policy for fighting against the spread of anti-mandate articles was a harsh censorship of the press. Among the suspended publications were *Al-Muktabas*, *Al-Mufid*, *Al-Maarad*, and *Al-Hakhikha*. The Mufti of Tripoli, Sheikh Abdul Hamid Karame, was imprisoned, and a few others, including a doctor, a director of a school, and a journalist, were expelled.<sup>443</sup> Moreover, a new press law was introduced according to which any paper was to be immediately censored if it reported rumors and wrong information that disturbed the public order. In addition, the author of such an article could be sentenced to prison from 15 days to 6 months and was to pay a fine of 100–500 Syrian gold.

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<sup>438</sup> Editorial, “Hay Tgheki Me Spanutyán Masin” [The Murder of an Armenian Boy], *Suriakan Mamul*, November 7, 1924, 2; Eprem Tohmuni, “Azgayin Arajnordaran” [National Prelacy], *Suriakan Mamul*, November 9, 1924, 3.

<sup>439</sup> CADN-SL 1647, Revue de la Presse 11-13 novembre 1924, articles of *al-Taqaddum*. For more about the Jews being accused to murder their Christian neighbors and rumors in Aleppo, see Veldkamp, “‘So that We Can Safeguard Your Lives’: The Jews of Aleppo between Colonialism, Nationalism, and Zionism, 1918-1946,” (Paper presented at the MESA Annual Meeting, 2021).

<sup>440</sup> Editorial, “Hay Tgheki Me Spanutyán Masin.”

<sup>441</sup> Edit., “Turk Terti Me Hayruranke” [The Accus. of a Turkish Paper], (a), *Suriakan Mamul*, July 22, 1924, 2.

<sup>442</sup> Editorial, Ibid, (b) *Suriakan Mamul*, July 24, 1924, 2; Translated from *Jumhuriyet*, December 17, 1924, “Hayeru Hamakhmbume Suriakan Sahmanaglukhin Vra” [The Armenian Gathering on the Syrian-Turkish Border], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 26, 1924, 3.

<sup>443</sup> MAE, vol. 50/209, #63, Ligue Française pour le defense des droits de l’homme et du citoyen, 31 juillet 1924.

The example given was that of the censored *Al-Arz*, which had published rumors about the ceding of Alexandretta, Antioch, and Aleppo to Turkey that did not correspond to reality.<sup>444</sup>

Provocative articles in the Turkish and Syrian nationalist press would continue with new vigor specially in 1925. At the beginning of March 1925, a targeted campaign against Armenians was again underway. The Damascene *Al-Muktabas* published news from “a reliable informant” who had told *Sada Al-Ahwal* that Armenian refugees went to the Arab cemeteries during the night and unearthed the buried dead, beating their bodies until the bones became ashes, which they then mixed with flour to bake bread to sell to the Alepines. Moreover, according to the paper, those guilty were already caught and imprisoned.<sup>445</sup> As fantastic as the story seemed, it was widely spread, and people believed it. For many weeks, the press was flooded with this rumor and accusations, as well as articles claiming the news to be false. Both *Al-Balagh* and *La Syrie* from Beirut published several articles denying the story. They claimed that such horrific tales were fabricated to target an entire population and play on the naïvety of the masses to incite them against the Armenians. *La Syrie* specified that it was very dangerous and there was a need to “tuer des l’oeuf ce monstrous canard” for the public benefit.<sup>446</sup> While many insisted that the origin of the news lay in Turkey, Topuzyan stated that the Syrian bakers fabricated it to discredit the Armenian bakers and fight the competition created by them. Armenian bakers came mostly from Sasun and were renowned in Aleppo.<sup>447</sup>

For *Suriakan Mamul*, it was clear that often it was neither the local population nor the authorities who spread such propaganda but the Turkish press, which did everything possible to disgrace Armenians by inciting the locals against them in order to achieve their deportation from Syria. What was different in 1925 was the fact that the propaganda center moved from Beirut to Damascus.<sup>448</sup>

Despite the efforts of the French High Commissioner, reproduction of the aggressive articles of the Turkish press in Syria remained an issue for a long time.<sup>449</sup> General Weygand, the newly appointed French High Commissioner, who arrived in Beirut on April 19, 1923, first embarked on touring all the major cities of Syria and Lebanon declaring everywhere that the French mandate was to be maintained. Not surprisingly, one of the first cities he visited was

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<sup>444</sup> “Khstutyunner Mamuli Dem” [Restrictions Against the Press], *Pyunik*, April 25, 1925, 3.

<sup>445</sup> Transl. from *El-Muqtabas*, “Voskornere Tsetselov Alyur Ke Shiner Egheer” [Made Flour by Beating the Bones], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 4, 1925, 3; Otian, “Mamuli Azatutyun” [Free Press], *Pyunik*, May 9, 1925, 1-2.

<sup>446</sup> Transl. from *Al-Balegh*, March 7, 1925, “Hereshayin Zruyc Me” [A Horrible Rumor], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 8, 1925, 4.

<sup>447</sup> These Armenian bakers controlled effectively almost all the bakeries in Aleppo since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani*, fn. 11, 324.

<sup>448</sup> “Hakahay Povocatione” [The Anti-Armenian Provocation] *Suriakan Mamul*, March 22, 1925, 2.

<sup>449</sup> DNA, from Melkonian to Noratunkian, a very long and comprehensive report Beirut, March 30, 1923.

Aleppo.<sup>450</sup> Such declarations were important to dispel the Armenians' worries and uncertainties and help them find employment and settle down, which was also in French interests.

Just four months later, Weygand reported his formula to succeed to Quai d'Orsay: "We need to reinforce the Christian element on which we would need to stand to counterbalance the Muslim elements and make Syria a country of mixed populations."<sup>451</sup> According to this logic, non-Muslim and non-Arab communities were to be empowered to counterbalance the rising Arab nationalism. This approach was also to become the basis of the French policies vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees as we shall see later.

Aleppo, neither politically stable nor the favorite settlement site for the refugees, would soon become one of the most important refugee hosting sites along with the Syrian Jazira. During these years, the refugee issue was among the most hotly debated themes among the Alepines, yet it would be wrong to claim that there was an open hostility towards the Armenians. Moreover, the calls from the Alepines to resettle the refugees in agricultural colonies on the large domains of the former Ottoman Sultans would be soon taken up by the French mandatory authorities and the refugee leaders.

## **Chapter IV: French mandatory authorities and the first refugee settlements**

This chapter aims to highlight the first refugee settlements that were initially accomplished either by refugees themselves or with indirect French support on an ad-hoc basis. It will also tell the story of the establishment of the model village in the Syrian Jazira, which would serve as the basis for the later large-scale refugee settlements.

### **Syrian Jazira and the refugees**

The French mandatory authorities understood very well that they must extend their control over the Syrian Jazira to combat the Turkish intrigues in Aleppo and strengthen their foothold in the rest of Syria. In this sense, the Syrian Jazira became critical in the battle to secure the French position. To solve the issue peacefully and strategically, several French policies were implemented. First, it was decided to reorganize the region into new administrative and political units by giving it a special administrative status. During Ottoman times, Jazira was divided between the mutasarifiya of Deir ez-Zor, and the vilayets of Mosul and Diyarbekir. Thus, the

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<sup>450</sup> "Zoravor Weigand Paravor Mutke Halep" [Weygand's Visit in Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, May 20, 1923, 2.

<sup>451</sup> CADN- SL 586, Weygand à le president de Conseil, letter (No. 612/KD), 25 août 1924.

region was economically connected with the Anatolian hinterlands. One of the most urgent issues facing the French after the ceding of Cilicia was the restoration of the traditional trade routes between Aleppo and Mosul on the one hand and Aleppo and Anatolia (through Jazira) on the other.

Jazira was soon reorganized by the Order (N: 1081) of the Governor of Aleppo, Mustafa Barmada, into two new qadhā-s – Hasake and Tell Tcholek,<sup>452</sup> governed by the officers of the intelligence service, while its special administrative status was justified by its predominantly nomadic population.<sup>453</sup> Upper Jazira was, indeed, mainly inhabited by nomadic and semi-nomadic populations and was mostly uncultivated. Soon, the heads of the Kurdish tribes also became members of the administrative council. As a further step in the fight against Turkish propaganda, General Billotte suggested a four-step program: the creation of the agricultural bank that would provide loans and seeds, a railway line between Darbasiya and Nusaybin, regular visits from a military doctor as well as regular distribution of the Turkish newspapers printed in Aleppo with a pro-mandate attitude.<sup>454</sup> The suggestion was initially refused because it was regarded as too adventurous. This notwithstanding, it would soon be taken up in the context of the refugee settlement that quickly took a new turn.

Syrian Jazira was also the place that Robert de Caix had highlighted for its economic importance, especially in the context of the ceding of Cilicia. All the economic plans the French had in mind for Cilicia were to be implemented in Jazira instead. The priority was the production of the much-needed cotton.<sup>455</sup> In fact, de Caix had even insisted that the “mise en-valeur” of the region alone was enough to render the whole of Syria prosperous and economically important.<sup>456</sup> De Caix was not alone in his claims. Mgr. Berré, the apostolic delegate and archbishop of Baghdad, had published a study in 1922 in which he explicitly mentioned that “Upper Jazira was especially suitable for the cultivation of cereals given the proximity of both Khabur and Tigris rivers.” In addition, he concluded that “the region was also suitable for the cultivation of cotton.”<sup>457</sup> After the ceding of Cilicia, the French were

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<sup>452</sup> Tell Tcholek would be replaced with Qamishli, after its establishment in 1926.

<sup>453</sup> Leutenant Pierre Terrier had been in Hassake since 1920, he was appointed as the first officer in august 1923 until august 1927. Velud, “Une experience,” 173.

<sup>454</sup> Velud, “Une experience,” 308, 309, 174.

<sup>455</sup> *Times* had published on January 19, 1925, that Adana province alone could produce up to 100,000 OZ (ounces/square yard) cotton, while its maximum production capacity was calculated to be 2 million and 800,000 the minimum. For comparison, it had mentioned that the average production in Egypt was 5 million. “What Did France Loose by the Ankara Agreement,” *Echo L'Orient*, cited in “Inch Vor Fransian Korsntsuts Enkyrayi Paymanagrov,” *Suriakan Mamul*, February 8, 1925, 3.

<sup>456</sup> Robert de Caix à Philippe Berthelot, Beyrouth, 23 mars 1920, cited in Khoury, *Une tutelle*, 220-225.

<sup>457</sup> Velud, “Une experience,” 1 :48.

specifically looking for other regions for the cultivation of cotton.<sup>458</sup> In the meantime, anti-mandate forces in Paris continued to question French presence in Syria, arguing that it costed too much money and soldiers while its economic viability was not obvious. The argument of cotton (and, later, oil) was quite powerful against such anti-mandate forces. Cotton had become an issue after WWI, when American production had decreased, resulting in higher prices. As late as 1926, French overseas possessions cultivated only 6% (8,500 tonnes) of the required cotton, whereas the rest had to be imported at higher prices.<sup>459</sup> In Syria, two locations, in particular – the valley of Orontes and Euphrates/Khabour<sup>460</sup> – promised to become excellent cotton production sites when two issues had been solved, irrigation and human resources. Both locations would later become important refugee settlement sites. As early as 1924, 30 ha of cotton had been cultivated in Deir ez-Zor on an experimental basis. A year later, the area had expanded to 184 ha, jointly cultivated in two locations, Deir ez-Zor and the valley of the Balikh River.<sup>461</sup> The success, however, depended not so much on irrigation but on the workforce.

Besides the cotton, Mgr Berré had also mentioned the possibility of finding oil in the region. In the same year, another report, this time from Father Poidebard, the famous Jesuit priest, indicated oil deposits in the extreme north-eastern parts of the Upper Jazira. The region, therefore, held the promise of compensating for the loss of oil-rich Mosul.<sup>462</sup> The third important point about the Upper Jazira was its potential for regional trade. After the emergence of the nation-states in the Levant, and the establishment of new borders, Jazira was separated from its Anatolian hinterlands. In order to revive Aleppo's economy and formal trade, there was an urgent need for a new hinterland. In addition, all the major routes connecting Mosul with Diyarbekir and Nusaybin passed through the Syrian Jazira. Furthermore, oil-rich Mosul promised to become a major trade center for the whole of Mesopotamia within a short time. Thus, France had every interest to be closer to it and well established on the other side of the border as soon as possible.<sup>463</sup> Apart from practical economic interests, there was also a romanticized discourse among the French military men, in particular, who believed they were there to protect the ancient Roman "Eastern Limes."<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Velud, "Une expérience," vol. 1, ftn 72.

<sup>459</sup> Velud, "Une expérience," 2 :274-275.

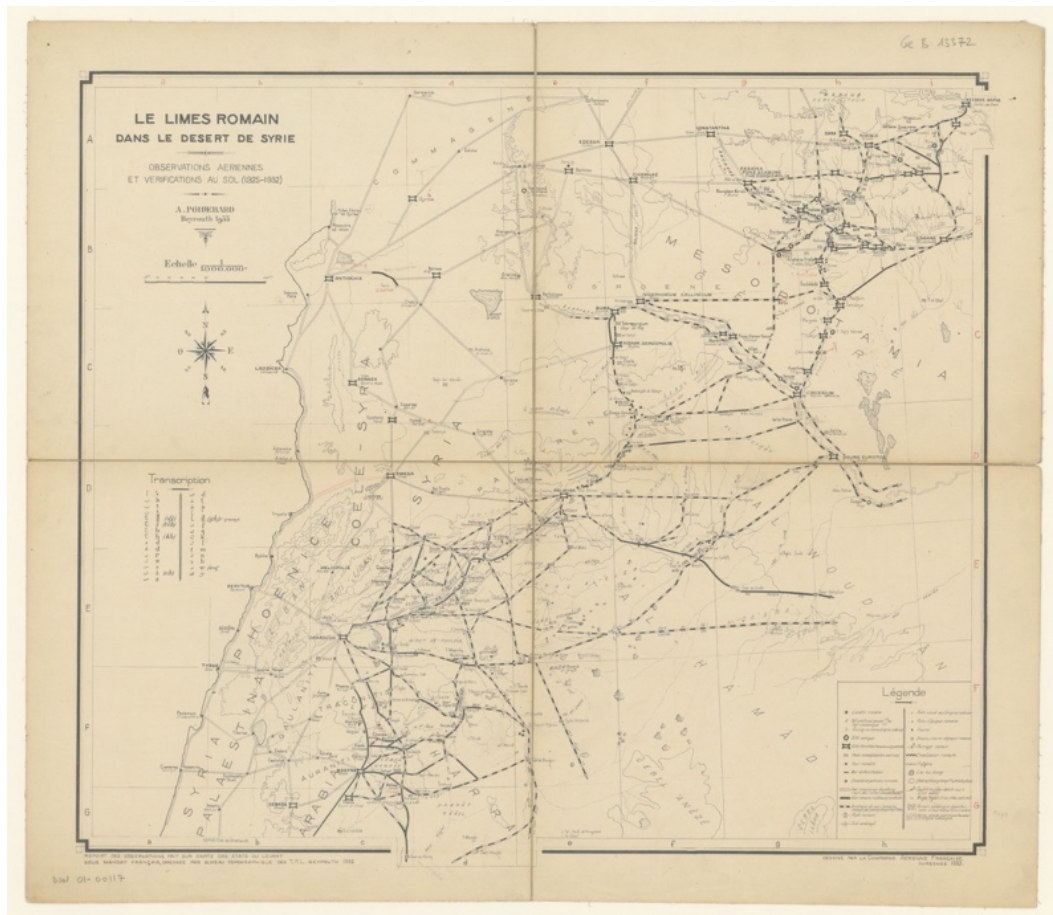
<sup>460</sup> The Khabour is a tributary of the Euphrates.

<sup>461</sup> Velud, "Une expérience," 2 :275, ftn 119.

<sup>462</sup> France ceded Mosul to Great Britain in 1919, More about it see, Barr, *A Line in the Sand*.

<sup>463</sup> Velud, "Une expérience," 1 :50.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid, 52. See also Archives des Armées de Levant, 2e bureau, 4H 120 / d:4, confidentiel, A. Poidebard, "Note Explicative Du Schema: Possibilités pétrolifères de l'extrémité Nord-Est du Territoire de Mandat Français (bec de Canard)," Beyrouth, 1 décembre 1924.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 6. The Roman limes in Syria. Source: Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France

Syrian Jazira, naturally, emerged as an excellent site for new economic projects that tackled several issues at once. It had the potential to become the vital trade hinterland for Aleppo, developing the entire region and improving conditions for the local population. This, in turn, could make the French mandate popular and render Syria profitable economically. Furthermore, substantial economic development projects would also serve as a justification for the French “civilizing mission.”<sup>465</sup> Thus, the French were in a hurry to extend their control over the region as soon as possible. This notwithstanding, French control of the region remained limited until 1922. In 1922, the furthest point controlled by the French was Hassetche (Hassake); French troops reached Qamishli only in August 1926, while the extreme north-east of Syria, known as the “bec de canard” was only brought under control in 1930.<sup>466</sup>

The “mise en valeur” of the Jazira region required the cultivation of its waste and fertile lands. However, to accomplish this, two main objectives had to be met: security (by controlling the nomadic tribes) and an increase in the number of cultivators. This, in turn, could be attained

<sup>465</sup> Velud, “La politique mandataire française,” 70-71.

<sup>466</sup> Rouben Boghossian, *La Haute Djézireh* (Imprimerie Chiraz: Aleppo, 1952), 34.

by sedentarizing the nomads (which might take several generations), improving the health of the local population by reducing infant mortality rates, or encouraging the resettlement of a new peasant population. None of these goals could be achieved overnight. The sedentarization could not be carried out too violently or quickly since it risked destroying the authority of the tribal chiefs, which would have dramatic economic and security consequences, reducing the livestock and eliminating any security on routes in the absence of French military presence. Moreover, nomadic tribes who had been forcibly sedentarized were believed to make ineffective cultivators.<sup>467</sup> Previous failed attempts by the Ottoman administration at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which had resulted in a massive rebellion by the Shammar tribe, were well-known to the French.<sup>468</sup>

Moreover, improved health conditions could increase the number of cultivators in the long term but not immediately. The question then was, “where to find new cultivators?” It was difficult to convince the surplus Syrian urban population to resettle in these far-away lands. Although certain Kurdish tribes from Turkey and Assyrians from Iraq expressed interest in settling in Syria under the French mandate, the French could not accept the Kurds, at least officially, before 1926 because of the *bon-voisinage* treaty concluded with Turkey. As for the Assyrians, the British authorities had raised the prices of passports and visas to such an extent that it had become virtually impossible for them to cross the border.<sup>469</sup> After 1926, this movement would become spontaneous and, with the pacification of Upper Jazira, would eventually produce the desired result, as we shall see in the later chapters.

In the meantime, a quick and easy option promising immediate results was to channel the refugee flow or encourage the refugees to settle in this far-away region.<sup>470</sup> Thousands of Christian Armenian refugees were living in overcrowded camps in almost all major cities of Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, new deportations of Christians were underway in Turkey. These programs started in 1922 and continued during the following years as Ankara executed a policy of reducing its entire non-Muslim population to 5%. Refugees were brought to the border in Jarablus and handed over to the French.<sup>471</sup> General Weygand reported on the new refugee flow to Quai d’Orsay in all his reports.<sup>472</sup> For example, according to the Aleppo intelligence report

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<sup>467</sup> Velud, “Une experience,” 3 :455.

<sup>468</sup> Cited in Sam Dolbee, “The Locust and the Starling,” 144, 144-148.

<sup>469</sup> Boghossian, *La Haute Djézireh*, 35.

<sup>470</sup> 350 km far from the closest major city Aleppo through a quasi-desertic route.

<sup>471</sup> CADN-SL 996, Dr. Bachalian, president de l’U.N. Arménienne d’Ourfa, report, Beyrouth, 9 novembre 1922; “Nor Gaghtakanner” [New Refugees], *Suriakan Mamul* February 24, 1924, 2; See also Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, chapter 7, 249-266.

<sup>472</sup> MAE, vol. 258 is entirely about the exodus of the Christians from Turkey.

of July 1924, between July 1923 and March 1924, 9,819 new refugees had arrived, all of them Christians.<sup>473</sup> Throughout 1924, Weygand sent detailed reports to Quai d'Orsay about these refugees; numbers, and the conditions under which they had been forced to leave.<sup>474</sup> He also received instructions on how to handle this new refugee flow. It is noteworthy that, as early as March 1924, the French authorities were suggesting that Turkey should do a population exchange on the model of the Greek-Turkish population exchange.<sup>475</sup> France was ready to host all the Christian populations of Cilicia and Anatolia in the territories under the mandate in exchange for the Turkish populations of Alexandretta.<sup>476</sup> The Turkish side, however, did not respond. In May 1924, Weygand appealed to Quai d'Orsay for advice on the problem of the continuous refugee flow, which could have undesirable consequences if left unorganized. He suggested three possible solutions – deport an equal number of Turks from Syria, push the refugees back (refoulement), or provide additional funds for the refugee settlement in Syria.<sup>477</sup> Velud concluded that none of the options were considered by Paris.<sup>478</sup> What followed in Syria and Lebanon, however, proved the opposite. The French had obviously opted for the third option, albeit not entirely at their own expense. In June 1923, *Suriakan Mamul* reprinted a news story from the *Daily Telegramme*, which announced that the French government had voted to allocate 1,600,000 francs for the settlement of the refugees in Syria.<sup>479</sup>

It was obvious that the French authorities urgently needed the cheap labor and surplus agricultural force they found in the refugees. The spontaneous settlement of the refugees in the countryside, in Kirik Khan (Alexandretta), and along the Syrian-Turkish border, had transformed the landscape almost immediately. Kirik Khan, for example, was a mere caravanserai before 1922, while after the arrival of the refugees, it had become a town. By the end of 1923, the population of Kirik Khan reached 5,000, when about 3,500 Armenian refugees arrived there with Lazarist priests and added to the 1,000 local Turks.<sup>480</sup> Soon, a Belgian

<sup>473</sup> MAE, vol. 258, Rapport du S.R. d'Alep du 8.7.1924, cited in Velud, "Une experience," 3:415, fn. 4.

<sup>474</sup> MAE, 258, rapport du S.R. d'Alep du 23.3.1924 cited in Ibid, 3 :416, fn. 6.

<sup>475</sup> On the population exchange, see Onur Yildirim, *Diplomacy and Displacement. Reconsidering the Turco-Greek Exchange of Populations, 1922-1934* (London: Routledge, 2006); Renee Hirschon, ed., *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003); Yannis Glavinis, *Muslim Populations in Greece (1912-1923): From Incorporation to Exchange* [in Greek] (Thessaloniki: Stamouli Publications, 2013), Ellinor Morack, "The Ottoman Greeks and the Great War, 1912-1922," in *The World during the First World War*, ed., Bley Kremers, (Essen, 2014), 215-230; Lysimachos Oeconomos, *The Tragedy of the Christian Near East* (London: Anglo-Hellenic League, 1923).

<sup>476</sup> "Une experience," 3 :418.

<sup>477</sup> MAE, 258, cited in Velud, "Une experience," 3:418, ft 8.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> "Fransia ev Hay Gaghtkannere" [France and Armenian Refugees], *Suriakan Mamul*, Aleppo, June 7, 1923, 3.

<sup>480</sup> CADN-SL 573, Corbyn, "The Present Postition of the Armenian Nation," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, vol. 19:4, (Octobre 1932), 587-616; Louis Jalabert, "Un peuple qui veut vivre: Les Arméniens émigrés en Syrie et az Liabn," *Etudes, Revue Catholique d'inérêt général*, 70 année, vol. 217, (Octobre 1933), 54-73, 57-62.



company had built a factory to transform the reeds of the Amek swamps into bricks, which were widely used for construction in the whole of Syria.<sup>481</sup> This settlement was very important, as the Amek valley, along with Jazira, was recognized as one of the priority regions for cotton production. The settlement, on the other hand, could only survive if the flooding of Orontes was controlled and the swamps drained to contain the flood damage and prevent the spread of disease.<sup>482</sup>

Furthermore, both French and Syrian authorities sought to highlight the importance of agriculture in Syria and maximize the country's agrarian capacity. This was achieved through various initiatives. For example, Aleppo Representative Council decided during its second session to include several courses on agriculture in the curricula of the high schools, which promised to revive Syria and promote everyone's well-being.<sup>483</sup> The French authorities, for their part, initiated the organization of an agrarian exhibition in June 14–20, 1923, in Aleppo, which also endeavored to boost the agrarian potential of northern Syria.<sup>484</sup>

Notably, Armenian newspapers also began to highlight the importance of agriculture for the development of Syria and the potential of Jazira in that regard. *Pyunik*, for example, compared Jazira with the Nile Valley in Egypt, which was backward during Ottoman times but prospered under the British thanks to its *mise en-valeur* and then employed innovative techniques.<sup>485</sup> The paper also reported on the construction of important routes and bridges in Deir ez-Zor and other significant initiatives.<sup>486</sup>

The agrarian potential of Jazira was undoubtedly immense. Moreover, it was not only the availability of the empty lands but also the legal status of these lands that made them an excellent refugee settlement site. In Syria, most land was categorized as cultivated land (*miri*) and belonged to the state. Those who could prove the cultivation of any parcel of land for 10 years were recognized as the owners. According to the Ottoman land registry of 1858, the lands in the Syrian steppe were recognized as *uncultivable (mawât) and belonged to no one*. All the lands that remained uncultivated for five consecutive years were recognized as *abandoned*

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> In May 1924, for example, Orontes flooding caused about 75,000 Ottoman golden liras, "Ameki Voghoghunnere" [The Flooding of Ameke], *Suriakan Mamul*, May 2, 1924, 1.

<sup>483</sup> Editorial, "Halepi Nerkayachutchakan 2rd Nstashrjane" [The 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Aleppo Representative Council], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 18, 1924, 2.

<sup>484</sup> Editorial, "Erkragortsakan Shabate" [The Agricultural Week], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 10, 1924, 2.

<sup>485</sup> "Surio Tentesakan Apagan" [The Economic Future of Syria], *Pyunik*, June 18, 1924, 1.

<sup>486</sup> "Surio Surhandak, Miss Jeppe -I Heravere" [Miss Jepe's Invitation], *Pyunik*, June, 21, 1924, 3.

(*mahlul*) and then *mawat*. The “mise en valeur” of these lands, on the other hand, turned them into *miri*.<sup>487</sup> Besides, large parcels of the land in Jazira had previously belonged to the Sultan.<sup>488</sup>

By accident or design, in the region of Hassake and Ras Al-‘Ayn, 37 parcels of lands were declared *mahlul*, with the decision of the Deir ez-Zor’s local Representative Council on August 15, 1922 (decision N: 339) and approved by the *mutasarif*, *qadi*, and *mudir*.<sup>489</sup> This gave the necessary legal ground for the French to claim these lands for new resettlements without directly confronting either the local authorities or the nomadic tribes. Two years later, further arrangements were made: two orders (N: 144/S of June 10, 1925, and N: 275 of May 5, 1926) introduced a distinction between the state-owned cultivated and uncultivated lands. While with the orders of N:132 and N:141, the waste territories claimed by the tribes were recognized. All of these policies were fundamental in laying the ground for the French refugee settlement policies, which had a two-fold aim – to cultivate the available waste lands and make Jazira prosperous again and promote the sedentarization of the tribes.

In Jazira, most of the land was claimed by diverse nomadic tribes, who used various tactics to claim their authority, often including force.<sup>490</sup> In order to claim these areas for agricultural use, the sedentarization of the occupying tribes was necessary. This was encouraged by close cooperation with the tribal chiefs, who were made privileged interlocutors of the French authorities. Tribal chiefs were also kept accountable for the actions of the entire tribe.<sup>491</sup> Gradually, these chiefs were encouraged to claim waste parcels of land for themselves in order to keep their former political and social status. The French willingly ceded these areas to them with only one condition – that they must be cultivated. The tribal chiefs, on their part, often entered into negotiations with peasant populations, usually Kurdish or Christian, to cultivate their lands. An early example is a cooperation between the Aneze tribe and the Armenian refugees mediated by Karen Jeppe, the legendary Danish missionary in Aleppo. Thus, refugee settlement and tribal sedentarization policies increasingly went hand-in-hand, which was key to the French refugee settlement policy.

The French authorities, who based most of their policies on their former experiences in Northern Africa, knew that before embarking on any major economic project or refugee resettlement, security needed to be achieved through tribal pacification policies.<sup>492</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>487</sup> Velud, “La politique mandataire.”

<sup>488</sup> Dolbee, “The Locust and the Starling,” 123.

<sup>489</sup> These were the governor, the judge and the head of the village. Velud, “La politique mandataire.” 449.

<sup>490</sup> Jazira was mainly home to two biggest albeit hostile Arabic tribes Aneze and Shammar.

<sup>491</sup> Velud, “Une expérience,” 3 :456.

<sup>492</sup> More on the pacification of the desert, see in Velud, “La politique mandataire.”

it was no accident that the military responsibility for Aleppo and Northern Syria was entrusted to General de Lamothe, who had previously been in Morocco. The latter tried to win different tribal chiefs to his side by adopting a “politique des grands chefs.”<sup>493</sup> Very quickly, it became obvious that de Lamothe had failed in his tribal politics. Consequently, a new method was adopted, which encouraged cooperation with more tribes instead of empowering just a few.

The first new settlers were French military men and their families, who settled around Hassake, as recommended by Père Antoine Poidebard,<sup>494</sup> “The security question is of fundamental importance to the stability for the refugee centers.”<sup>495</sup> The plan was to achieve security by first establishing military posts with soldiers and their families, following the example of the Romans, and then settling the refugees by creating new villages and towns along the Khabur and Jaghjagh rivers. Before any systematic refugee settlement began, some spontaneous settlements were created by the refugees themselves. Since many refugees originally came from the region and owned lands and orchards on the Syrian side of the border, they settled in Jazira due to the French military presence. This was the case, for example, in Azez (located between Aleppo and Kilis), where about 1,200 Armenians, mostly from Kilis, were settled. Reportedly, these settlers wished to be closer to their former homes in the hope that they could return, given positive developments in the future. The same was also true for many who came from Urfa, Berejik and Seruj, who settled in Jarablus, Tell Abyad, ‘Ayn Arus, Ras al-‘Ayn and Mumbuj.<sup>496</sup>

In the case of the Armenians from Urfa, they had started to establish new villages on the other side of Euphrates river as of 1908. Three such villages were already established before the Armenian Genocide,<sup>497</sup> which after the creation of the new states and borders laid in Syria. The same situation also prevailed in Jarablus, another border village, which had 2,000 Armenians, who came from Ayntab and Urfa, and within a short time, already had their church and school. *Pyunik* declared explicitly that “thanks to the French military presence, they

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<sup>493</sup> In 1924, it was believed that only 225,000 were nomads in Syria (125,000 nomades and 100,000 semi-nomads) out of the total of 1, 520,000. See in CADN-SL 1536, Affaire bédouines, 1922-1930, Note, février 1930, cited in Velud, “Une expérience,” 2:244, fn. 64. Two main chiefs were identified, Emir Nuri Saalan of the Ruwala-s in the south and Emir Mughim B. Muhid in the north. The aim was to build an alternative force around Aleppo and Damascus that the French could use. Velud, “Une expérience,” 2:230, fn. 28.

<sup>494</sup> Noteworthy, Poidebard had served as a Catholic missionary in the Armenian vilayets before WWI and mastered the Armenian language. In the aftermath of WWI, he had been the French official representative in the Caucasus. During the mandate years, he was stationed in Beirut from where he had frequent trips to the Syrian Jazira. He was a devoted French researcher on the Roman boundaries (limes) in Mesopotamia as well as a respected member of the Central Refugee Committee (Comité central des réfugiés) in Beirut.

<sup>495</sup> CADN-SL 571, Rapport du Poidebard sur la situation des réfugiés de Haute Jézireh, octobre 1927, 11.

<sup>496</sup> Hakob Cholakian, *Karen Jeppe: Hay Goghgotayin ev Veratsmundin Het* [Karen Jeppe: with the Armenian Golgotha and Rebirth] (Aleppo: Arevelk, 2001), 107.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

(Armenians) are a majority in Jarablus with about 200 families.”<sup>498</sup> By the end of 1924, Reffye reported that there were about 2,000 Armenians in Jarablus to whom the land had been given free of charge. Three thousand more Armenians were in Deir ez-Zor. In Arab Bunar, the Armenians had already 35 shops, while in Azaz, the local Muslims had warmly hosted the refugees.<sup>499</sup> The *Pyunik* reporter testified that, all over northern Syria, from the banks of Euphrates to the Mediterranean, one could find many Armenian small colonies.<sup>500</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, in December 1924, the Turkish ambassador in Paris issued the first complaint about the Armenian concentration along the border.<sup>501</sup> The French response was a categorical denial that there were any organized refugee settlements in Syria. Instead, it was pointed out that the refugees had settled on their own lands. As we shall see later, Turkey would successfully solve this issue two years later by claiming all these lands during the negotiation of the friendship treaty with France.

The first refugee settlements, thus, became a reality without direct French intervention. French indirect involvement, however, is acknowledged by Jeppe. This was done on the initiative of General Billotte, the French delegate in Deir ez-Zor and the Euphrates region. He discreetly encouraged and facilitated the settlement of those refugees who wished to settle in the region, always close to the French military bases. Jeppe described Billotte’s role as follows, “General Billotte had an important role in improving the conditions of these wretched people by his far-sightedness and humanity. On his initiative, many refugees were settled in the valley of Euphrates.”<sup>502</sup> Notably, only small groups of refugees settled in the region most of them trusted neither the French nor the tribes. According to Jeppe, Billotte would have succeeded in implementing large refugee settlement schemes much more effectively and with much better results if he had chosen the coastal cities, which were favored by the refugees. Nevertheless, it was in the remoter regions that larger parcels of land were available.<sup>503</sup> Moreover, there was constant talk that Antioch would be returned to Turkey, and land in Lebanon was scarce. Thus, the choice of the Jazira region was slowly becoming inevitable, and soon would take a shape given certain unexpected events discussed in the later chapters of this dissertation.

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<sup>498</sup> “Hayutyune Jarablusi Mej” [Armenian in Jarablus], *Pyunik*, December 24, 1924, 2.

<sup>499</sup> CADN- SL 575, Installations Armeniens en 1924, Haut-Commiss. à monsieur le president du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, “La proection des femmes et des enfants à Alep,” Beyrouth, Decembre 30, 1924.

<sup>500</sup> Seto, “Djampu Noter” [Diaries of a Trip], *Pyunik*, November 12, 1924, 1-2.

<sup>501</sup> CADN-SL 576, Service politique, bureau d’études Terrier, *Arménie et les Arméniens*, février 1931.

<sup>502</sup> Karen Jeppe, “Norek Hayer Abrahami Hoghin Vra” [Newcomer Armenians on the Lands of Abraham], Aleppo 1930, printed in *Gandzasar*, special volume (Aleppo, 1996), 27-31, 28.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, the French had the task of managing the refugee flows skillfully to increase the number of spontaneous settlements. The challenge was how to achieve this without provoking the local population or the local Syrian administration. Was there a concrete refugee settlement plan? Because in the early 1920s and up to the mid-20s, no security had been established in Jazira, the first refugee settlement experiments were to be implemented elsewhere. As the conquest of Jazira remained incomplete, and security was fragile in the Jazira region, French High Commissioner Weygand turned his attention to the Valley of the Orontes in the Alexandretta sanjak. On July 3–4, 1924, Weygand visited Aleppo and Alexandretta, where he announced that the economic development of Aleppo and northern Syria, in general, preoccupied the French authorities. He expressed hopes that once the French had ratified the Lausanne Treaty, free trade would be possible with Turkey, which would improve the economic situation. He did not forget to mention that the Alepines were to pay greater attention to agriculture, particularly cotton production.<sup>504</sup>

In 1924, an official project for the irrigation and control of the waters of the Orontes was conceived and implemented in 1926 after the Syrian Revolt, where the first large-scale refugee settlements were tried. Although small refugee settlements were also created in Jazira, the area would gain new settlers and become a significant refugee settlement site at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, in the light of a new refugee flow from Turkey. This episode will be the primary case study of Part IV of this dissertation.

### **First refugee settlement experiments**

*Geghard*, a prestigious Armenian yearbook published in Aleppo, has a chapter in its 1996 edition about the Armenian refugee settlement experiments in Syria, both in Alexandretta and Northern Syria. The lengthy article starts with the following introduction.

Armenian settlements in the diverse regions of Syria were mainly spontaneous and without any support from the international planning or support. There have been several weak and small-scale attempts done by the League of Nations to create small agricultural colonies, which, nevertheless, have not only been insufficient but also largely unsuccessful. There has never been a massive resettlement project. The interest of the international community came too late and even accidentally.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Own correspondent, “Nor Gaghtakanneru Jamanum: Zoravar Weygan Halepi Mej” [The Arrival of The New Refugees: General Weygand in Aleppo], *Arev*, July 21, 1924, 1.

<sup>505</sup> Robert Jebejian, “Hay Taragirneru Teghavorume Surio Gavarayin Sherjanner Hamashkharh. Arajin Paterazmen Etk, 1920-1939” [The Settlement of the Armenian Refugees in Syria after WWI], *Geghard* (Aleppo, 1996), 79-86, 79.

Then, the author recalls the first encounter with the representatives of the LoN with the Armenian refugees. General Ernst and Capitan Lumm, two Danish members of the LoN-administered International Commission on Mosul, arrived in Aleppo in 1922. Jeppe, who had worked among the Armenians of Urfa for many years and had been based in Aleppo since 1920, met with her compatriots at the Baron hotel. She then suggested taking them on a tour of the Armenian refugee camps. The misery of the camp and its inhabitants shocked the Danes profoundly, and they arranged for a photographic record to submit to the LoN.<sup>506</sup> The photos by Vardan Terunian, the town's top photographer, were published years later and today are among the most important testimonies about the camp and its inhabitants.<sup>507</sup> It was also then that Jeppe suggested to her compatriots that they should recommend to the LoN that the Armenian refugees should be settled in the agricultural colonies.<sup>508</sup> The next year, in 1923, Jeppe was invited to attend one of the meetings of the Swedish chapter of the International Fellowship for Peace and Reconciliation, an organization intent on fostering positive relations between refugees and their neighbors, that by coincidence took place in Denmark, her homeland.<sup>509</sup> There Jeppe reported on the refugees in detail. The head of the Swedish delegation, Natanael Beskov, soon visited Syria and promised financial support, which was crucial for Jeppe's operation.<sup>510</sup> In the meantime, in September 1921, Jeppe had already accepted the post of commissioner of the LoN in Aleppo responsible for reclaiming Islamized Armenian children and women.<sup>511</sup> Jebejian noted that while at the end of the 1920s, other bigger settlement efforts followed under the banner of the LoN or "international," in reality the main funding was from the Armenian philanthropic organizations, primarily AGBU, as well as individual donations.<sup>512</sup> Later, Burnier, the joint representative of the LoN, the International Labor Office (ILO), and the International Red Cross (ICRC) in Beirut confirmed that this was indeed the case.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Some of these photos are included in the Annex of this dissertation.

<sup>507</sup> The Album of the refugee camps, 1922-1936 was published by the Violet Jebejian library in Aleppo in 1986.

<sup>508</sup> Karen Jeppe, "Norek Hayer," 28.

<sup>509</sup> Jonas Kauffeldt, "A Little Light in a Night So Dark: Karen Jeppe's Work in Ottoman Armenia and Syria," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 22 (2013), 110-111. The author has made an extensive use of the personal correspondence of Jeppe and her articles held in the Danish national archives.

<sup>510</sup> Karen Jeppe, "Norek Hayer," 28.

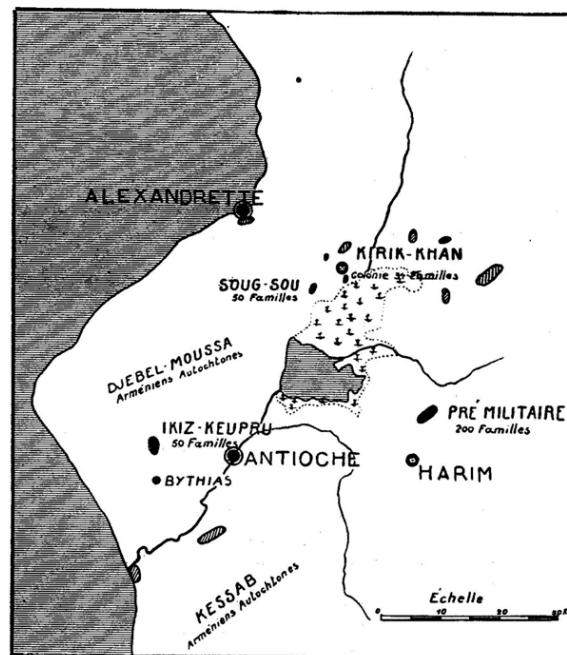
<sup>511</sup> More on this mission see Watenpaugh, "The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920-1927," *American Historical Review*, 115:5 (2010), 1315-1339. Jonas Kauffeldt provided another date for Jeppe's acceptance of this position, March 1922, see in Jeppe, *Misak: An Armenian Life*, trans. by Jonas Kauffeldt, (London: Gomitas Institute, 2015), xxxv.

<sup>512</sup> Robert Jebejian, "The settlement," 80.

<sup>513</sup> Georges Burnier, "L'installation de réfugiés arméniens en colonies agricoles dans les Etats sous mandat français," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 10, N : 113 (May 1928), 401-414, 408.

In the meantime, the first efforts were made by the refugee leaders themselves in the region of Alexandretta. In the summer of 1923, Levon Norashkharean, from Zeytun, was appointed as the school director in one of the six Armenian villages of Antioch by the AGBU. As soon as he arrived there in mid-September, he met with the local leaders, Narek Abrahamian, the elected deputy, and Movses Ter-Galustian, the mudir. Soon he received an offer from them to settle the refugees of Zeytun permanently in one of the abandoned villages in the region, called Ekiz Keopru. The site, high in the mountains, bore much resemblance to Zeytun.<sup>514</sup> Ter-Galustian also arranged a meeting with the French delegate in Antioch, Captain Morgan, telling him about their plans to settle the refugees in the Alexandretta region.

Morgan, in his turn, revealed the French plans to connect the Suwayda-Alexandretta (rail) line by settling Armenian refugees along the line and turning it into an “Armenian home.”<sup>515</sup> His view was that refugees from Zeytun would be the most suitable candidates since they were mountain people and famous for their courage. Moreover, the whole funding for the settlement was to be provided by the LoN.<sup>516</sup>



Établissements d'Arméniens en Syrie  
(décembre 1927)

Figure 7. Armenian agricultural colonies. Source, George Burnier, “L’installation de réfugiés arméniens,” (1928), 406.

<sup>514</sup> Jebebjian, “The settlement,” 80.

<sup>515</sup> Alexandretta had already a substantial Armenian population, 5,875 out of the total of 13,057 in Alexandretta town, 8,000 out of 10,000 in Kirik Khan. In addition, there were the ancient villages of Musa Ler (Jabal Musa) and its surroundings populated by native Armenians. Ibid, 81.

<sup>516</sup> Jebebjian, “The settlement,” 81.

As a result, 45 families from Zeytun were settled there. The promised funding, however, did not arrive, and the village did not survive long. In the second half of the 1920s, after the arrival of Burnier, the settlement took another form; new villages were created first in Alexandretta (Soghok Su – close to Kirik Khan in 1927, Hayashen and Norashen – in the region of Rihaniye in 1928), and later northern Syria – Jazira. For Jebejian, these efforts were too small and inadequate for the refugees' needs. Interestingly, his view was that Burnier's efforts in Beirut were a total failure. The construction of the new neighborhoods in Ashrafiye planned in 1923 did not have a single building to shelter the refugees 10 years later, when the biggest camp in Beirut burned down. Moreover, other urban neighborhoods (Burj Hamud and Khalil Bedwin) were built by the refugees themselves and their leaders.<sup>517</sup>

Importantly, the French authorities learned from the failures of the first refugee settlements attempted in the Lebanese countryside. In the words of Burnier, "it was an interesting experiment."<sup>518</sup> Burnier suggested that, in the future, the internal diversity among the refugees should be considered. It was deemed desirable to reunite the refugees according to their town of origin or at least their region of origin and to have Armenian intermediaries and an Armenian notable as their head. Other strategies included selling the land to the refugees instead of renting it to them under a scheme by which they would gradually reimburse the money. This system would make the refugees landowners and tie them to the country more firmly. The famous speech of the French High Commissioner Henri Ponsot, which is quoted widely, was based on the same logic:

It is necessary to help the refugees *to settle permanently*. This is the goal. With the Armenians what one fears is that they wish to go elsewhere as soon as they have some savings. This must be avoided, and to avoid it we must make out of them small property owners, of a land, a house or a field [...].<sup>519</sup>

Subsequently, the next four settlements (Ikiz-Keupru, Soug-Sou, Kirik-Khan and Pre-militaire) in Alexandretta (1927–28), as well as a dozen other colonies in the Upper Jazira (1929–1932), were a success. Popular Armenian notables were appointed to convince the refugees to be re-settled, while funds mostly came from the Armenian Central Refugee Committee of Paris and other philanthropic organizations.<sup>520</sup> While choosing the settlement

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>518</sup> Burnier, "L'installation de réfugiés arméniens," 404.

<sup>519</sup> CADN-SL, 575, Procès-verbal, Comité de secours aux réfugiés arméniens, 24 juin 1931. (Highlighted by the author).

<sup>520</sup> Burnier, "L'installation de réfugiés arméniens," 408.



sites, several conditions were taken into account, the location, the availability of the high-quality land at affordable prices, the possibility of having several settlements close to each other, and the presence of enough native inhabitants to avoid raising suspicions.<sup>521</sup>

Although the role of the Armenian notables and the Armenian funding has been key, nevertheless, the role (both direct and indirect) played by the French authorities is impossible to downgrade. This support was, first of all, psychological since the refugees felt protected. Second, the French facilitated the acquisition of land parcels and supported the registration of these lands. There is no evidence that French authorities mediated between the local populations, the local authorities and the refugees. In fact, in many instances, the refugees themselves entered into negotiations or trade relations with the local authorities, as the establishment of the “model village” suggests. This may also explain why there were no major land disputes in the Syrian Jazira; at least no evidence of these was found in the documents we consulted.

### **The Model Village: extraordinary cooperation between the Armenian refugees and the Aneze tribe**

A special place in the initial experiments was occupied by the so-called “model village” founded by Karen Jeppe in Jazira in April 1924, in a place called Tel-Samen, once again without direct French intervention. Tel-Samen was 36 kilometers away from Raqqa in the direction of Urfa and 245 kilometers east of Aleppo. It was located on the banks of the Belek river, in a place with abundant water and fertile soil, which was nevertheless abandoned and uncultivated.<sup>522</sup> The village was created by Jeppe and her team, who, after conducting numerous child rescue missions in the region,<sup>523</sup> established this “Armenian village” in cooperation with the local influential tribal sheikh to create a “model village.” At this point, it was believed that 30,000 Armenians still lived on the other side of the border.<sup>524</sup> The rescue missions were conducted quietly to avoid conflict with the locals. Jeppe advocated patience to prevent a massive flight of Armenian captives, fearful that this might inundate the Syrian economy and aggravate local animosities.<sup>525</sup> Clearly, lessons learned from the past were applied, especially those gained from the bloody clashes in Aleppo in February 1919. One example was the fact

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> “Hay Gaghtakannere Kmeknin Depi Gyugh” [Armenian Refugees Leave for the Countryside], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 10, 1924, 2.

<sup>523</sup> The mission in Jarablus was opened in 1922, see in Jeppe, *Missak*, xli.

<sup>524</sup> Herardian, “Azgeri Dashnaksutyanyan Surio Vorbahavaq Misione” [The LoN Children Rescue Mission in Syria], *Suriakan Mamul*, Aleppo, July 29, 1924, 1.

<sup>525</sup> Karen Jeppe, *Missak*, xxxiv.

that Jeppe categorically refused to accept any child born of a mixed marriage with a Muslim father in her institutions.<sup>526</sup> The issue of mixed marriage was believed to be one of the main reasons for the Aleppo massacre of the Armenians (discussed earlier) because forceful rescue efforts had been interpreted by many local Muslim elite and intellectuals as invasive, misguided and even associated with the extension of the unwanted French administration in Syria.<sup>527</sup> According to Jonas Kauffeldt, who translated Jeppe's diaries and writings, by adopting the approach of dialogue over force, Jeppe sought to cultivate in the local population an acceptance of the Armenians as people with rights, in other words, to humanize the captive Armenians in the eyes of those holding them and thereby secure their release.<sup>528</sup>

The first rescue attempts were made in Raqqa and especially in Jarablus, located right on the Syrian-Turkish border, where new refugees started to pour in from the internal regions. The mission had agents in several key locations. In Deir ez-Zor, for example, it was Grigor Haykian and, after his murder, his wife, Satenik. Until the end of 1923, no state or other support was provided to this mission, which operated entirely by its own means.

After the end of 1923, a sudden change occurred; the French mandatory authorities became increasingly interested in the mission and even willing to support it. An official representative body, composed of two Muslims and two Christians, was formed in Deir ez-Zor, while Haykian was allowed to look for captives in the Muslim households. In March 1924, Haykian was officially employed by the mission when a new station was opened in Hassake with close collaboration with the Catholic priest in Mardin. Another Catholic Armenian, Vasil Sabagh, a former merchant from Urfa, used his prior commercial connections to facilitate the release of many Armenians from the Kurdish households of Mardin.<sup>529</sup> Through this cooperation, 50 orphans soon arrived from across the border. The efforts of the mission were facilitated by the French military forces and officials deployed in the region.<sup>530</sup> By the end of May 1924, 546 new ex-captives had arrived, including 326 boys and 220 girls.<sup>531</sup>

French support was the key to success since it provided security and added confidence. Moreover, as Herardian explained in the pages of *Pyunik*, “under the favorable French attitude

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<sup>526</sup> Herardian, “Azgeri Dashnaksutyanyan Surio,” *Pyunik*, August, 6, 1924, 3 Cholakian, *Karen Jeppe*, 80.

<sup>527</sup> Wathenpaugh, “The League of Nations,” 1328-1329, 1336.

<sup>528</sup> Jeppe, *Missak*, xxxiv, xlv.

<sup>529</sup> Ephraim K. Jernazian, *Judgment unto Truth* (Transaction publishers, 1990), 130, 156-157,

<sup>530</sup> “Azgeri Dashnaksutyanyan Surio Vorbahavaq Misione” [LoN Child Rescue Mission], *Pyunik*, July 19, 1924, 3.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid*, *Pyunik*, July 30, 1924, 3.

towards the mission, we have a wide activity arena before us. We may even be able to gather in Syria a large number of refugees as it happened in 1918.”<sup>532</sup>

According to Herardian, the mission wished to found a village to provide agricultural work, empty the overcrowded camps of people who did not have families but were familiar with the peasant life, and make the refugees self-sufficient quicker. It was said that nine months were needed to train the rescued individual and make him/her self-sufficient, thus preventing his/her return to his/her former masters. Another advantage was the generation of additional income to finance the activities of the mission. Although no one seemed to think of agriculture as profitable, it actually provided an excellent opportunity. Jeppe was convinced that the Armenians were well suited to improve agricultural production in Syria and that their presence would help bolster the rural economy by improving efficiency and yields.<sup>533</sup> It must be said that Jeppe was greatly inspired by the Jewish colonization happening during the same time in neighboring Palestine. The enduring transformation in Palestine became clear to Jeppe when she visited in 1924:

All the while it is exceedingly interesting to see the two worlds meet. At times one passes through orange groves, interspersed with vineyards, olive gardens and swaying palm trees, and within the gardens, one can see well-built houses; everything is enveloped in prosperity. Those are the Jewish colonies. Right next to them lie clusters of filthy clay huts without a tree, reflecting the familiar image of the Oriental landscape. Those are the Arab villages. The English surely know what they are doing by “bringing in” Jews to Palestine. Now I truly understand the issue at its core.<sup>534</sup>

Jeppe immediately drew parallels between the Jewish settlements and those of the Armenians in Syria. Armenians were expected to have the same transformative effect in Syria, although the enormous difference in the available financial resources for their settlement compared to the Jewish ones was acknowledged. At the same time, Jeppe also realized the need to establish strong and lasting cooperation with the locals to avoid any land or water disputes that would endanger the lives of the new settlers. This was done, for example, by making sure that the access to medical care and education enjoyed by the Armenians was also extended to the neighboring villages. Sometimes, technical support was provided to the Syrian peasants directly in order “to alleviate poverty and cultivate good will.”<sup>535</sup> Jeppe was successful in cooperating efficiently with both the local tribal chiefs and the French authorities. The latter

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<sup>532</sup> Herardian, “Azgeri Dashnaktsutyun Surio Vorbahavaq Misione” *Pyunik*, July 30, August 2, 1924, 3; *Suriakan Mamul*, July 24, 1924, 1.

<sup>533</sup> Jonas Kauffeldt, “A Little Light,” 111.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid*, 116-118.

became increasingly interested in her work, especially after the new High Commissioner, de Jouvenel, had a similarly inspiring visit to Palestine.

Meanwhile, as Jeppe was planning to establish a village, an unexpected offer arrived from Hashem Pasha, one of the three heads of the influential Anezi tribe who inhabited the Syrian Jazira. During the French-Turkish conformation in Cilicia, when it was not yet clear under whose control Jazira would fall, Hashem and his cousin Mijhem had made a strategic decision that would allow them to profit from the situation regardless of the outcome of the confrontation. Hashem had passed to the Turkish side while his cousin moved to the French side, waiting for the conflict's conclusion.<sup>536</sup> The agreement was reached that the winning side had to accept the other part of their tribe. As it happened, the French retained the control of the Syrian Jazira; thus, Hashem was considered a political suspect by the French and even by certain members of the tribe.<sup>537</sup> In addition, he had taken on many debts to reinforce his authority over his community and struggled to pay them back because of the economic hardship that had plagued Syria in recent years. As a result, Hashem, like many other tribal chiefs, felt he was losing the ground under his feet. New strategies and partners were required to re-establish his former dominant position in the region. This was why Hashem decided to cultivate the lands owned by his tribe with the help of the Armenian refugees. Besides, since Armenian refugees enjoyed the protection of the LoN, Hashem had hoped to boost his own authority among the tribes by establishing closer relations with them.<sup>538</sup> The deportation of the peasants of Karmudj village of Urfa to Aleppo in 1923–1924 played a significant role in his decision.

Karmudj was a tiny Armenian village close to Urfa, with extensive orchards, as well as vegetable and fruit gardens. For decades, it had served as the main marketplace for many tribes in the region, while its Armenian inhabitants had been intermediaries between the tribes and the merchants of Urfa. For their unique role, the villagers were protected by the tribes in the desert. During the Armenian genocide, the villagers of Karmudj were dispossessed and massacred. Those who survived had returned to their native village after the Armistice and were once again deported in 1923–1924. This is when, once in Aleppo, they appealed to Hashem Pasha, whom they knew well. Afraid of being subjected to ruthless exploitation like other villages in the Pasha's possession, they insisted that Jeppe should be an intermediary. The choice of Jeppe was obvious for several reasons. First of all, she was not entirely unknown to

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<sup>536</sup> More about opportunistic strategy of the tribes during the immediate post-Ottoman period, see Hasan Kayali, *Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

<sup>537</sup> Karen Jeppe, "Norek Hayer," 28.

<sup>538</sup> Cholakian, *Karen Jeppe*, 109.

Hashem or the villagers of Karmudj. Jeppe had spent many years as a missionary in Urfa, arriving there in 1903.<sup>539</sup> Moreover, in 1909, she had bought a parcel of land not far from Kamurdj, in a place called Medjeidé, building orchards, vineyards, and a summer residence for her orphans. Notably, Medjeidé, before becoming safe and prosperous in the hands of Jeppe and her team, was famous as a center for robbers that people avoided even during the daytime. Within a short time, the farm became a stabilizing factor in the region.<sup>540</sup> During the Armenian Genocide, Jeppe and a few of her protégés spent months in the vineyard with the help of some local Kurds and Bedouin and especially Lezgi Osman, a local outlaw and famous sheikh from the village of Karmudj, who shielded Jeppe from harassment by the Ottoman gendarmerie.<sup>541</sup> Moreover, with the help of the local Kurds and Bedouin, a network of escape routes was developed. Once hiding was rendered impossible, many of her team members were hosted by the Aneze tribe under Muslim names. They had spent some time with the tribe before arriving in Aleppo with the support of the tribespeople. Thus, trust had already been established between Jeppe, her team and the Aneze tribe. Secondly, Jeppe was soon appointed as the LoN's commissioner in Aleppo under the banner "Société des Nations: Commission pour la protection des femmes et des enfants dans le Proche Orient," an institution that carried a certain authority.

Previously, upon her arrival in Aleppo (1920), Jeppe had spent months studying the maps, the arrival routes of the refugees and the tribes who inhabited the region. She had decided, together with Misak Melkonian, her adopted son, to settle peasant refugees in the countryside in Northern Syria. They were against having the overcrowded refugee camps on the outskirts of the cities in utter misery. However, this was not an easy task because the refugees insisted on staying together in the cities. In particular, those who were unfamiliar with the region refused categorically to be sent to the desert; they trusted neither the Muslims nor the tribes in whose hands thousands of refugees had suffered just a few years ago.<sup>542</sup> This notwithstanding, Jeppe, in agreement with the Armenian prelacy of Aleppo, had sent Misak to Hassake on a fact-finding mission. The Armenian prelacy, for its part, sent the priest Ter-Mekertich for the same purpose. Misak was to ascertain the attitude of the local and French authorities towards these refugees, while the priest was tasked with collecting detailed information about the refugees.<sup>543</sup>

Jeppe and Misak were convinced that such a settlement project was impossible without the agreement of and close cooperation with the local authorities; otherwise, it risked turning

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<sup>539</sup> More on her activities in Urfa and beyond see Jonas Kauffeldt, "A Little Light", 79-126.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid. 88; Cholakian, *Karen Jeppe*, 31-33.

<sup>542</sup> Karen Jeppe, "Norek Hayer," 28.

<sup>543</sup> Cholakian, *Karen Jeppe*, 109-110.

the Syrians against the refugees. Their first action was a meeting with the chief sheikh of Aleppo's mosque, to whom they revealed their plans. The latter was sympathetic and readily provided them with the names of the heads of the tribes in the region who might be interested in this settlement project. The names included Sheikhs Nazem (Shammer), Mijhem and Hashem (Aneze), all of whom inhabited territories close to the Syrian-Turkish border. In 1921, Jeppe and Misak were presented to Nazem Pasha in Aleppo, who promised his assistance.<sup>544</sup> At the end of the same year, Jeppe was appointed as the LoN's commissioner. This appointment further enhanced her authority, especially among the tribes. Notably, most of their new target population, the Armenian women and children to be rescued, were held among these tribes in Northern Syria. The first action of Jeppe was to invite Hashem and Mijhem to Aleppo to inform them about her new appointment and her new mission. Both sides agreed that the rescued women and men would be settled on the lands that belonged to the same tribes, founding new villages and starting cultivation with innovative methods where possible.<sup>545</sup> It is noteworthy that the agreement was made with the Aneze tribe, which had reportedly taken the most children and women during the Armenian deportations. This was obviously a mutually beneficial strategic step; Hashem still retained the same persons as cultivators on his lands, while Jeppe regrouped them in *Armenian* villages, returning them to the Armenian nation and giving them a sense of their "true" belonging.

This is why, when the villagers of Karmudj appealed to Hashem Pasha, expressing their wish to be settled under his rule as cultivators, the latter arrived in Aleppo immediately. He wished to build a new "Medjeidé" on lands belonging to him, in a place called Tell Samen.<sup>546</sup> An agreement was quickly concluded between the sides. It was decided that Misak was to be relocated with the peasants. In the beginning, only 59 families from Karmudj were to be settled on the site. A delegation composed of Jeppe, Misak, and notables of Karmudj headed by Hashem Pasha traveled to Tell Samen to see the settlement site in person. Jeppe later described this journey in words full of symbolism:

It was as if we had returned to our homeland; Urfa lay on the other side of the river. We were all pleased since "we regarded this part of Asia Minor as a homeland. I traveled with my own car, which carried the banner of the 'Representative of the League of Nations.'" Hashem's personal car followed mine. I could not help thinking that this was by far the strangest connection between the League of Nations, the newest institution of these modern times, and the Bedouin chieftain, the representative of one of the most backward people of the world...<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Cholakian, *Karen Jeppe*, 41-42.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>546</sup> Karen Jeppe, "Norek Hayer," 29.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

The delegation was first greeted in Raqqa by the local French military units, who also helped them find their way to Tell Samen. Although the Euphrates River ran close by, irrigation was impossible without interventions that required money and engineering knowledge. A few wheat fields were already seen here and there. One of the first preoccupations of the sheikh was to build a dam to prevent conflicts between the new settlers and the locals. The system in place was simple: a wall of grass, ready to collapse at any time, by which peasants directed water towards their fields. According to the agreement, Jeppe was to cover half the expenses of the new dam in exchange for having the right to use the water.<sup>548</sup> Hashem immediately honored his promise, putting on the table the other half, about 500 gold (10,000 DM). He was also to cover the expenses for the construction of the houses, which started at once. Grains were also provided, and vegetables and cotton were planted immediately, with the understanding that the harvest was to be divided. The families of the first settlers joined their family heads in Tell Samen at the beginning of June 1924. They were also joined by several newly rescued persons, who soon formed families.

Herardian explained that Hashem Agha wished to use Armenian labor to create a model village in the region to boost his prestige. His suspicions of the French provided further motives for his participation in the project.<sup>549</sup> Jeppe's mission was to provide human resources and modern tools. Hashem seemed very enthusiastic about this joint endeavor since his deserted



A photograph of group of Armenian genocide survivors from the Aleppo Rescue Home who settled in Karen Jeppe's agricultural colonies east of the Euphrates, c. 1925. These colonies quickly grew into proper little villages, complete with traditional beehive-style houses for each family. For more than 2,000 years such conical structures have been made in the region, typically with sunbaked bricks covered with layers of straw and mud that keep them warm and dry during winters and cool during summers (Source: The Karen Jeppe Archives, Gylling, Denmark. Courtesy of Missak Kelechian).

village was to be revived; moreover, new scientific methods were to be introduced there, making his village a model for the entire region.<sup>550</sup>

Figure 8. First settlers. Source: *Houshamadyan*.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid; The details of the creation of Tel-Samen are included in Jeppe's letter to Thomas, see in Archives of the Societé des Nations (hereafter, SDN), C1430, from K. Jeppe to A. Thomas, September 14, 1925.

<sup>549</sup> Herardian, "Azgeri Dashnaksutyany Surio Vorbahavaq Misione" [The LoN's Rescue Mission of Women and Children], *Suriakan Mamul*, July 24, 1924, 2.

<sup>550</sup> "Azgeri Dashnaksutyany Surio Vorbahavaq Misione," *Pyunik*, July 30, 1924, 3.

The project was equally important for Jeppe, who wished to settle the adult rescued Armenians and make them self-sufficient in a place where they would be protected.<sup>551</sup> The mission feared that the funding for their rescue operations would not last forever, and there was a need to settle the rescued people permanently.<sup>552</sup> Jeppe explained that the aim was to instill confidence in the refugees, who would then agree to leave the camps in the cities and settle in these regions.<sup>553</sup> Jeppe also had other hopes for the settlement. She aimed to trigger a spontaneous flow of captives to the model village, where they would feel protected.<sup>554</sup> These secretly cherished hopes soon paid off when 50 new orphans arrived, having escaped from their former lords.<sup>555</sup>

Although the village was entirely surrounded by Kurdish, Turkish and Arab villages, it was well protected by night guards as well as French military units. Misak and the newcomers were respected by all the tribes, who also protected the new cultivations by not allowing their animals to graze nearby. Jeppe explained this success by the fact that a “mysterious foreigner” was behind the project, who rarely appeared in the region, and who, in her turn, was supported by the equally mysterious and fear-provoking “League of Nations,” a powerful name for the locals.<sup>556</sup> According to Jeppe, this was necessary to protect Armenians who were settled in Syria, which was not their country, “and living among foreign peoples, one cannot know if they might not be at risk of their lives and property.”<sup>557</sup>

The land in the new village was worked by the newest European machines; indeed, tractors appeared there for the first time in the region. The neighboring Arab *fellahs*, who worked their lands with old and primitive methods, observed the construction of this village closely, and soon they were imitating the newcomers’ system of planting cotton and vegetables.<sup>558</sup> Jeppe testified that Hashem had managed to convince many of his tribespeople that “agriculture is the future,” encouraging them to ask for advice from Misak and the Armenians.<sup>559</sup> The locals became even more convinced when, because of the harsh winter, they had no wheat but could buy from the new settlers, who not only had enough but were able to

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<sup>551</sup> The rural settlements were also considered ideal for the rescued captives, as living in the countryside, with the Kurdish or Arab tribes was considered harboring as least moral and pure living, K. Jeppe, *Misak*, xxxiii.

<sup>552</sup> Herardian, “Azgeri Dashnaksutyun Surio,” *Suriakan Mamul*, July 24, 1924, 2.

<sup>553</sup> Jeppe, “Norek Hayer,” 30.

<sup>554</sup> About the activities of Herardian and Jeppe see in *Suriakan Mamul*, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22, 31 July 1924.

<sup>555</sup> Robert Jebejian, “The Settlement,” 83-84.

<sup>556</sup> Jeppe, “Norek Hayer,” 30.

<sup>557</sup> Jeppe, *Misak*, xxxv.

<sup>558</sup> “Haykakan Gyugh Mijagetkum” [An Armenian Village in Mesopotamia], *Pyunik*, December 13, 1924, 1; Jeppe “Norek Hayer,” 30.

<sup>559</sup> Jeppe “Norek Hayer,” 30.



sell some in the first year of their arrival.<sup>560</sup> However, this was not all, other tribal sheikhs also approached Jeppe, including Medavat and Mijhem, as all of them wished to have similar villages in their domains cultivated by the Armenians.

Refugee settlements enjoyed not only the support of the tribes, the local peasants and the French military units but, most importantly, that of the local government, which was facilitated by the Sheikh.<sup>561</sup> Hashem Pasha declared everywhere that the new settlers belonged to the Aneze tribe; thus they no longer were considered a foreign element in the countryside. Not surprisingly, Hashem's grave became an important pilgrimage site for both his tribespeople and the settled Armenians. He was referred to as the "Grand Old Man," who had managed to improve the economic conditions of his tribe and establish peace and security in the region.<sup>562</sup> The Armenian village had become *the* model village in the region for the locals, while for the Armenians it was a haven that made them self-sufficient and gave them hope for the future. In the later chapters, we shall see how mutual cooperation was further forged between the Armenian settlers and the natives in the future, even during periods of hardship, such as when the entire region was plagued by an extended drought in the early 1930s.

In the summer of 1924, Jeppe and her team participated in the Agricultural Exposition of Aleppo and presented the achievements of the model village.<sup>563</sup> In parallel, Jeppe gathered 35 Armenian notables in Aleppo to present the success stories of the past two years. She spoke in fluent Armenian and used the opportunity to plead for Armenian support for her rescue missions.<sup>564</sup> She argued that, although the results were satisfactory, and about 200–250 captives were rescued annually, it would take many years to rescue them all. More financial resources were needed, especially as the LoN funding was to end in 1925. Every Armenian national body was to stand by since, "If it is a humanitarian action for the foreigners, it is an important way of nation-building for the Armenians."<sup>565</sup>

One year later, *Nor Pyunik* reported that despite many difficulties (such as a bad harvest due to an unusually cold winter, the distance from the main cities to sell the vegetables, and high transportation costs), neither Hashem nor Jeppe were disappointed. Instead, they provided more seeds to the new settlers. The difficulties notwithstanding, the village was free from the financial and moral issues that plagued the camps in the cities. It encouraged the Armenian

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<sup>560</sup> SDN, C1430, from K. Jeppe to A. Thamas, September 14, 1925.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid; Jeppe "Norek Hayer," 31.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>563</sup> "Surio Surhandak: Miss Jeppe-I Hravere" [Jeppe's Inviation], *Pyunik*, June 21, 1924, 3.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> "Azgeri Dashnaksutyan Surio Vorbahavaq Misione" [LoN Child Rescue Mission], *Pyunik*, August 2, 1924, 3.

authorities to give greater importance to projects that were much better for the refugees than the camps. Moreover, it reported that just 12 km from this village, another Armenian village, Sheikh Isa, had emerged with 20 houses. The village belonged to the uncle of Hashem Pasha, Sheikh Mijhem. This village had nothing to do with Jeppe's village since peasants had agreed directly with Sheikh Mijhem and were reportedly happy. It was said that the French military units protected both villages.<sup>566</sup>

In the autumn of 1925, two new stations were opened by Jeppe in Arab Punar and Bab that specifically aimed to liberate Armenians captured by the Kurdish tribes who fled to Syria as a result of the Sheikh Said rebellion.<sup>567</sup> Jeppe also sought to enlarge the scope of her activities in the countryside by settling the liberated captives there. In the spring of 1926, further steps were taken in this regard.<sup>568</sup> In the report submitted by Jeppe, it was clearly mentioned that all the stations opened by her team in remote regions were always close to French military forces, ensuring the safety of the stations. The military also delivered *laissez-passer* to the Armenians, who could travel through Syria without any trouble.<sup>569</sup> The presence of the French soldiers in these remote places and their eagerness to protect the Christians drew new refugees, who settled along the Syrian-Turkish border and were engaged in cross-border trade.

By the spring of 1926, the region was dotted with more Armenian villages. Besides Tel Samen, which sheltered 120 persons and had its own school and church, there were new ones. Ayn-Isa, a two-hour drive from Tel Samen, had 47 families, 22 Armenian and 25 Arab. The village belonged to Melhem Pasha, and the Armenians were settled there with the agreement of Jeppe and the Pasha. Not far from Tell Samen, 45 refugees (12 families) founded Kherbert Rez, which was owned by a Muslim from Urfa. Another 40 refugees from Urfa (11 families) were settled in Ayn Al-Arus. Twenty-nine families had founded a new village close to the railway in a place called Tel-Abyad. They had opened up shops and worked the land. Three train stations west toward Tel Abyad was Arab Punar, where 317 people (85 families) and several Armenian-speaking Assyrians were settled. In addition, there were 60 Armenians who owned shops in Arab Punar, but had left their families in Aleppo. It was said that many Turks crossed the border to shop here. Finally, Raqqa, the largest city in the region, had 285

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<sup>566</sup> "Kyanke Haykakan Gyughin Mej" [Life in the Armenian Village], *New Pyunik*, September 30, 1925, 1.

<sup>567</sup> More on this rebellion see, Tejel, *Le mouvement kurds*; Tashjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 276; Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (Austin, 1898); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Seikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London, New Jersey, 1992).

<sup>568</sup> "Merdzavor Arevelki Kinneru ev Vorperu Azatagruytan Ashkhatane" [The Rescue Mission of the Women and the Children in the Middle East], *Yerevan*, September 17, 1926, 1.

<sup>569</sup> MAE vol. 50/382. # 163, Societe des Nations, Rapport de la Commission pour la Protection des femmes et des enfants dans le proche-Orient, Alep, 28 Juillet 1927.

Armenians (90 families), mostly craftsmen and shopkeepers. There were also a significant number of Islamized Armenian girls and women in the houses of the locals. Reportedly, the new settlers had good relations with the original inhabitants. The local government had provided them with land, free of charge, to construct houses and a chapel.<sup>570</sup> The same process was occurring in the countryside of Aleppo. Here, the number of Armenian refugees was even greater; 1215 persons (200 families) in Jarablus, 311 persons (79 families) in Mambij, and 178 people (45 families) in Bab.<sup>571</sup>

Jeppe appealed to the LoN recalling the rapid success of her settlement project as a solution to the growing refugee problem and a natural extension of the LoN's sponsored rescue mission:

No element could even be more suited for the colonization of this country than these young Armenians with all the energy of their race tingling in their veins, acclimatized and accustomed to the village life among the Arabs. The colony would attract them in thousands and enable them to become Armenians again under the most favorable conditions, with a prospect of future, prosperity before them, utilizing that which seemed the greatest obstacle, their "Arabization" to build up a strong and thriving peasantry fit to understand and to be understood by the native population. Then, we would have erected in this remote place a monument to give evidence of the salutary activity of the League of Nations in the world.<sup>572</sup>

She then demanded immediate financial support for her colonization projects, arguing that they would be a success, not only for the mandatory power but also for the LoN. Her calls for financial support and for widening the scope of her activities continued in the coming years. The "moral support of the League" was enough to instill confidence in the refugees and persuade them to leave the over-crowded refugee camps for the countryside.<sup>573</sup> Moreover, "while the misery of the Armenians in the camps is frightening many away who wanted to return to their people, the prosperity of the colonies attracts them."<sup>574</sup>

The French mandatory authorities were soon praised publicly by the League's Mandate Commission for their "wonderful humanitarian action" (*belle action humanitaire*), after Jeppe had announced that "the closer collaboration with the Mandatory Power has proved a real success."<sup>575</sup> The next year she would declare that her rescue efforts were backed and supported

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<sup>570</sup> "Halepi Shejakayki Haykakan Gaghutner: Raqa, Tell Samen, Ayn Isa, Khebert Rez, Ayn Arus, Tel Abyad, Arab Bunar" [Armenian Colonies in the Countryside of Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 4, 1926, 3.

<sup>571</sup> "Halepi Shejakayki Gaghutner" [Colonies in the Countryside], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 14, 1926, 3.

<sup>572</sup> LNA A-46, 1924, League of Nations documents, 1919-1946, "Protection of Women and Children in the Near East," Geneve, September 1, 1924, cited in Jonas Kauffeldt, "A Little Light," 112.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>574</sup> SDN, C1430, "Report of the Commission for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East," Aleppo, July 1925 – 30 June 1926, Geneve, August 10, 1926.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*

by the “French government whole-heartedly”.<sup>576</sup> In yet another report she would reveal to the League that, “there is no political obstacle to this scheme. The High Commissioner himself had asked me to found as many Armenian villages as possibly I could.”<sup>577</sup>

By this, a new layer was readily and unexpectedly added to the French “modernization” and “civilizing mission” in Syria – “humanitarianism.” This new layer was not only “trendy” in the 1920s but was much more effective in enhancing prestige than the previous two.

As Jeppe was calling on the LoN to seize the colonization initiative, the French were becoming increasingly wary of ceding power to the League and Jeppe. Riffye, the French acting High Commissioner, claimed that although the French “humanitarian efforts” had been praised, they were largely overshadowed by Jeppe. He penned a report highlighting that the French had also made financial inputs to refugee care, spending over 1,329,000 francs in the years 1922–23, creating facilities for the refugees by issuing free of charge “laissez-passer,” and providing medical checks by French military doctors. In addition, almost everywhere, the local authorities had protected and helped the refugees settle down.<sup>578</sup> Thus, the French efforts ought to be better known, “for they were much more important than the works of Jeppe.” Besides, her work could not succeed without efficient cooperation with the French. Not only did Jeppe’s work overshadow French mandatory efforts, but it was also dangerous. In particular, it could endanger relations with Turkey and the local tribes; one of her agents had recently been killed after liberating an Armenian woman. Finally, Jeppe’s mission was also at fault because many foreigners (?) had deserted the French legion. In short, Riffye cautioned against Jeppe’s activities and advised that she should be replaced by a French representative to continue her work of settling the refugees in agricultural colonies.<sup>579</sup> This recommendation was followed in the context of improved French- LoN cooperation and under the pretext of lack of finances.

One of the priorities was to bring Jeppe and her activities, including her personal humanitarian initiatives, under French control, as well as establish closer relations with Jeppe and Burnier, who had already arrived in Beirut. French authorities reported that, since the financing of Jeppe’s rescue missions by the LoN was coming to an end, Jeppe herself was looking for closer cooperation with the French authorities.<sup>580</sup> Jeppe, indeed, wished to prolong

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<sup>576</sup> Societe des Nations, Commission permanente des mandats, observations de la commission sur l’administration des terroires sous mandat ‘A’, (Syrie et Liban – sous mandat français, 1 Jan. 1925, MAE, vol 50/228, #152-155; SDN, C1430, “Report of the Commission for the Protection of Women and Children,” Aleppo, July 28, 1927.

<sup>577</sup> In the same report, she assumes the cost of the settlement for a family of four to be 10 sterling. Jeppe, “LoN Commission for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East, Aleppo,” January 31, 1926, 7.

<sup>578</sup> CADN-SL 575, Installations Armeniens en 1924, Haut Commissaire à le monsieur le president du conseil, ministre des affaires etrangeres, “La protection des femmes et des enfants à Alep,” Beyrouth, 30 decembre 1924.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> MAE, vol. 50/382. # 150. Note pour la sous direction du Levant, “Œuvre de Miss Jeppe,” Paris, 27 sept. 1926.

her activities as long as possible, especially after seeing how her first two established villages had prospered, and realizing the need for more similar villages. In September 1926, when her report was to be heard in Geneva, she traveled in person to present the achievements of her project. There, she highlighted once more the valuable support that her efforts had received from the French mandatory authorities and the new High Commissioner Jouvenel, in particular. It must be said that her relations with the former High Commissioner Sarrail had been particularly tense.<sup>581</sup> Now, she praised the French, who badly needed praise on the international stage amid the ongoing crisis in Syria (the Syrian Revolt). She mentioned that her efforts were successful, mainly thanks to the support of the French officers in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor. As for prolonging the timeframe of her activities, she mentioned the arrival of many Kurdish tribes in Northern Syria after the Sheikh Said uprising, who had brought with them many captive Armenian women and children. Another year was needed to complete this task.<sup>582</sup> Although Jeppe succeeded in prolonging her activities for another year, the French, too, succeeded in adding a new clause in the conditions, whereby Jeppe's activities fell under the direct control of Burnier.<sup>583</sup>

By this time, the French authorities were impressed and inspired by Jeppe's success. An agricultural survey was accomplished in 1925 in Deir ez-Zor.<sup>584</sup> It aimed to reveal how many hectares could be cultivable if irrigation channels were built and how many additional cultivators would be needed. The population of Deir ez-Zor at that time consisted of 175,500 inhabitants, out of which less than half, 61,750, were peasants.<sup>585</sup> The inquiry established that 299,830 ha would be available and almost an equal number of cultivators (329,780) would be needed; that is to say, 5.3 times more than the population of Deir ez-Zor at that time.<sup>586</sup>

During these years, nationalist fervor was at its height in Syria, and, in the summer of 1925, most of the country revolted; therefore, the other important task of the mandatory was to keep the region and the tribes far from this nationalist movement. Significantly, the region was far from the major urban centers and had long served as a detention place for political prisoners.

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<sup>581</sup> Jonas Kauffeldt, "A Little Light," 114.

<sup>582</sup> MAE, vol. 50/382. # 106. Societe des Nations, Protection des femmes et des enfants dans le proche-Orient, rapport de la cinquième Commission à l'Assemblée, Geneve, 24 septembre 1926.

<sup>583</sup> SDN, C1430, Seventh Ordinary session of the Assembly, "Protection of Women and Children," A.127, 1926.

<sup>584</sup> These extensive 250 pages long study was authored by Charles Pavie, while the introduction was written by general Billotte. It contains rich statistical data on Aleppo and northern Syria. Interestingly, the longest section, the entire 28 pages were devoted to cotton production in Syria (Jazira, Amek, Idlib) and future perspectives. See Charles Pavie, "Renseignements agricoles : etat d'Alep," Governorate de l'Etat d'Alep, N: 17.920/1.481, 34- 62.

<sup>585</sup> CADN-SL 506, Rapport du 10 aout 1926, Ce rapport est également publié dans le Bulletin Economique Trimestriel des pays sous Mandat Français, année 1926, 3e trimestre : "L'avenir de l'irrigation dans l'Etat de Syrie", 1082-1088, cited in Velud, "Une expérience," 2 :275, fn. 120.

<sup>586</sup> Velud, "Une expérience," 2:275.

A step in this regard was the removal of all the political prisoners from the prisons of Deir ez-Zor and Hasake.<sup>587</sup> Any prolonged stay of the tribal chiefs in the cities was discouraged in order not to “to throw them prematurely into political struggle.”<sup>588</sup> Instead, there was an effort to cultivate good relations with them to guarantee French longer influence in the Levant. In order for this to happen, the competition and divergence between the diverse tribes were to be maintained instead of uniting them into a force that could one day turn against French rule.<sup>589</sup>

We shall see how the French took the success of Jeppe’s initiative as a basis for their refugee settlement policy in rural colonies in the Jazira after the Syrian Revolt. A new era of cooperation between the mandatory authorities and the LoN started with the settlement of the refugees, and this will be discussed in the following chapters. It was only natural that, given the promising start, the French authorities decided to take further measures to prevent the departure of the refugees from Syria and Lebanon by vehemently opposing any suggestions to transfer them elsewhere. The Treaty of Lausanne, which denied the survivors of Genocide the right to return to their homeland, made them stateless. The Treaty, however, foresaw a possibility “for those who had a different ethnicity to take the citizenship of the country with whom they shared the same ethnicity.”<sup>590</sup> In the case of the Armenians, the only state that qualified was Soviet Armenia. France, however, opposed any such attempts, claiming that the Armenians living in Syria were already self-sufficient and well settled.<sup>591</sup> In August 1924, just a year after the Lausanne treaty, the French authorities granted the Armenian refugees Syrian citizenship, securing them for the Syrian state. This episode is the main subject of Part II of the current dissertation. The new status and civic rights essentially aimed to keep the refugees in Syria permanently or for a longer time. The large-scale refugee settlements would be accomplished with the close collaboration with the LoN.

## **Chapter V: Refugees as pawns in a great game**

This chapter explains why and how the Armenian refugees became preferred targets for the LoN’s humanitarian interventions. It also shows how the same refugees justified the *raison d’être* of diverse Armenian national delegations and how each spoke on their behalf. As well

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<sup>587</sup> Ibid.

<sup>588</sup> CADL-SL 552, Note N:1821/K 3, cited in Velud, “Une expérience,” 2:240, fn. 59.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid, fn, 61.

<sup>590</sup> Article 32 of the Lausanne Treaty.

<sup>591</sup> Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun*, 154.

as the delegations, the Armenian state (both independent and Soviet) and the USSR, all laid claims to the refugees.

### **Changing international humanitarianism and the Armenians**

International interventions on behalf of the Armenians dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These initiatives had portrayed the Armenians as “deserving, suffering Christians on the edge of a ‘barbaric’ East.”<sup>592</sup> In the context of the First World War and genocide, a new language of international responsibility gradually emerged. This new trend would become the modern “secular” form of humanitarianism, as shown by historians Watenpugh and Rodogno.<sup>593</sup> For Watenpugh, the Armenian cause was the prototypical object of humanitarianism. He documented the transition of this *cause* from a purely Christian and missionary endeavor into a large-scale humanitarian intervention closely intertwined with international politics during the interwar years.<sup>594</sup> In the same vein, for historian Rodogno, Western humanitarianism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was strictly related to sovereignty (including its denial), and self-appointed benevolent imperialism, intended for the protection of societies declared unfit to govern themselves.<sup>595</sup>

The cooperation between the mandatory powers and the LoN, for its part, served as a justification for the existence of the LoN. One such cooperative effort would soon become the refugee settlement, as well as other aspects related to refugee issues (such as legal status and employment). Historian Gatrell has pointed out how population displacement, humanitarianism and politics have always been intertwined because “the creation of refugees opened up political possibilities.”<sup>596</sup> He has shown how the “minorities” displaced on account of their nationality were afterward mobilized around the image of “refugee.” One ironic outcome was that, during the disintegration of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, it was the refugees who helped create the foundations for new nation-states and, by doing so, brought about the very outcome that the

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<sup>592</sup> Jo Laycock, “Speaking the Language of Humanitarianism or ‘Speaking Bolshevik’: Visions and Vocabularies of Relief in Soviet Armenia, 1920-1928,” in *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the Twentieth Century*, ed., David Brydan and Jessica Reinisch (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 91; For the Orientalist depictions and discourse about the Armenians, see Laycock, *Imagining Armenia: Orientalism, Ambiguity and Intervention, 1879-1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); For literature on these earlier interventions, see Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815-1914 (Human Rights and Crimes against Humanity)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>593</sup> Watenpugh, *Bread from Stones*; Davide Rodogno, *Night on the Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

<sup>594</sup> Watenpugh, *Bread from Stones*, 163.

<sup>595</sup> Rodogno, *Night on the Earth*, 7.

<sup>596</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

imperial administrators had hoped to avoid.<sup>597</sup> Once the War was over, however, it was the “refugees who became a crucial element to rethink domestic and international politics.”<sup>598</sup>

The LoN, itself still a “fledging institution,” was hardly in a position to address issues of homelessness and could not meet the refugees’ material needs.<sup>599</sup> At the end of 1920, some philanthropic organizations and governments believed that the LoN was not the right agency to deal with refugee issues at all.<sup>600</sup> It all started as ad-hoc emergency interventions. In the spring of 1920, Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian polar explorer, who would soon become the High Commissioner for Refugees, was tasked by the LoN’s Secretary to set up a relief program and organize the repatriation of prisoners of war (PoW).<sup>601</sup> The appointment of a High Commissioner, rather than the creation of a body, reflected the member states’ waning interest in displaced persons and their growing financial and political disengagement.<sup>602</sup> The High Commissioner was unpopular with most member states since refugee assistance was likely to be a long-term project unlike the exchange of PoWs and threatened to drain resources needed for post-war reconstruction.<sup>603</sup> Member states feared that Nansen would oblige them to make regular financial commitments, which none of them wished.<sup>604</sup>

The post-war refugee crisis was on such a scale that millions were affected, yet it was not only the numbers that mattered. Other questions, such as who was a “refugee” and who was eligible for assistance, mattered, too.<sup>605</sup> All these issues were central in the case of the Armenian refugees of Syria, which we aim to explore in this dissertation.

### **LoN and the Armenian refugees**

Relations between the LoN and the Armenian refugees go back to the lengthy negotiations at Lausanne. Between 1918 and 1923, the creation of an Armenian “national home” and “homeland” was subjected to various speculations by the Great Powers, who repeatedly modified the content, the wording, and the geography. The Armenian newspapers of the time

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<sup>597</sup> Ibid.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid.

<sup>599</sup> Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 2001), 66.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>601</sup> There is rich literature about Nansen and his legacy. This task was carried out successfully for which Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922, see, Claudena M. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Clarendon Press; 1st edition, 1995)

<sup>602</sup> Francesca Piana, “Nansen, Fridtjof,” in IO BIO, Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations, ed., Bob Reinalda, et al. [www.ru.nl/fm/iobio](http://www.ru.nl/fm/iobio) (Accessed on August 22, 2020).

<sup>603</sup> Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 89-90.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>605</sup> Gatrell, *The Making*, 43.



clearly reveal not only the excitement and confidence but also the disappointment as they reported the discussions of the world leaders in Syria. For one, *Hay Dzayn* of Aleppo had a news section, and not a single issue was released without a report on the matter. At first, there was news of the Sèvres Treaty that promised a “Free and United Armenia,” which, however, did not include Cilicia. By March 1921, the London treaty transformed this “Free and United Armenia” into a mere *national home* for the Ottoman Armenians in Turkey, while the final decision was left to the LoN. On its part, in the second annual meeting of September 15, 1921, the latter decided vaguely to ensure the formation of a “national home” independent from the Ottoman state, but its geography was not discussed and, in fact, never would be. All the discussions on such a *home* were abandoned after the conclusion of the Lausanne treaty. This treaty did not mention the Armenians and the Armenian national home at all. Instead, it contained minority protection clauses.<sup>606</sup>

At the beginning of January 1923, it was clear that Turkey would not sign any treaty if it contained anything about the “Armenian home” (*foyer*, the French word). Noratunkian was informed about it by the British representative, Rumbold, “We (Allied Powers) still maintain the idea of the “home” without mentioning it in the Treaty.”<sup>607</sup> According to Aharonyan, the Allies tried to solve the Armenian issue separately under the auspices of the LoN. They were also told that Turkey would soon be admitted to the LoN and that the issue would be discussed further.<sup>608</sup> It seemed that the ability and the usefulness of the LoN were put to the test precisely over its capacity to solve the issue of the “Armenian home,” as stated explicitly by the British senator Robert Cecil – the author of the term “home.”<sup>609</sup> The LoN saw it in the same way, as revealed by Eric Drummond, the LoN secretary to Aharonyan.<sup>610</sup>

Because there was little hope that Turkey would agree to an “Armenian home” on its territories, all the sides (Armenians, Phil-Armenian organizations, NER) seriously considered Checherin’s offer, made in Lausanne, to settle the refugees on Soviet lands. Aharonyan reported that the new motto was “Russian lands and American money.”<sup>611</sup>

After the conclusion of the Lausanne treaty, both Armenian delegations, the DNA and the HHA, were frequent guests at the LoN, both at the annual meeting and the various

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<sup>606</sup> Part I, article 40, 42.3, 44, part 3, article 90a, 90b in *Hask*, (Antelias), August- September, 1965, 380-387.

<sup>607</sup> Vladimir Ghazakhtcian, “Haykakan Miatcyal Patviarkutyun Gortsuneutyune Lozani Konferansum, 1922-1923” [The Activities of the Armenian United Delegation During the Lausanne Negotiations], Paris, January 14, 1923, *Banber Hayastani Arxivneri*, 2 (2007), 99-121, 113.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid*, December 11, 1922, 107.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

subcommittees. There they were listened to and questioned on the issue of the refugees, as well as on the contentious “national home” and its possible geography and location.

The LoN’s policies vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees were largely drawn from the ad-hoc policies previously undertaken on behalf of Russian and Greek refugees, in which Nansen had been instrumental.<sup>612</sup> When, in September 1923, Nansen presented to LoN’s Assembly a settlement plan for the 10,000 refugees in western Thrace as a model that could be reproduced elsewhere, he was immediately approached by Noratunkian, the newly appointed head of the DNA.<sup>613</sup> The latter asked Nansen to extend the LoN’s mandate over the Armenian refugees too, by facilitating a massive settlement plan and providing international passports that would allow refugees to travel in search of employment. Both demands would receive a positive response. It must be noted that Nansen was at first reluctant to intervene on behalf of the Armenians, fearing that it would be a reason for the Great Powers to stop providing them with aid.<sup>614</sup>

Noratunkian suggested settling 50,000 refugees in Soviet Armenia by providing their transportation and one-year living costs through donations from the member states with the example of the Greek settlement model. Not only was this new settlement scheme discussed at the LoN immediately (September 1923), but preliminary cost estimates were also made. One million sterling (or 4,700,000 dollars) was needed to irrigate the proposed Sardarapat plain in Soviet Armenia to enable the settlement of 50,000 refugees.<sup>615</sup> The LoN’s General Secretariat was tasked with preparing a detailed report to be discussed next year, while special committees were formed immediately in France and Italy composed of famous architects and deputies to study the project.<sup>616</sup> The LoN’s decision on the international, so-called “Nansen passports,” for the Armenian refugees (with the example of the Russian refugees introduced in July 1922) would arrive next year, in July 1924.<sup>617</sup>

Nansen tried hard to present all his wide-ranging refugee settlement activities as “humanitarian” and not “political” endeavors. He, therefore, held private negotiations with

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<sup>612</sup> On the LoN’s intervention with the Russian refugees see, Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Gatrell, *The Making*. On displacement in the Russian Empire, see Gatrell, “War, Refugeedom, Revolution,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, 58, 1 (2017), 123-146. On the Caucasian front, see Asya Darbinyan, “Humanitarian Crises at the Ottoman-Russian Border: Assisting Armenian Refugees of War and Genocide, 1914-1915,” in *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the Present*, ed., Jo Laycock et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020)

<sup>613</sup> Piana, “Nansen, Fridtjof.”

<sup>614</sup> P. Gatrell and J. Laycock, “Armenia: The Nationalization, Internationalization and Representation of the Refugee Crisis,” in *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918-1924*, ed., Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 193.

<sup>615</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 257.

<sup>616</sup> “Azgeri Dash. ev Hay Gaghtakanutyune” [LoN and the Arm. Refugees], Suriakan Mamul, May 8, 1924, 4.

<sup>617</sup> The Nansen passport was extended to Assyrians, Assyro-Chaldean and Turkish refugees in 1928 and eventually recognized by 52 governments, see in Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 96.

Albert Thomas, the director of the ILO, suggesting a collaboration to address the refugee settlement issues. Nansen was convinced that employment was central to solving the refugee problem. According to him, the important political issues regarding refugees were already resolved, and what remained were problems of employment and settlement. Moreover, a permanent settlement was needed.<sup>618</sup> A kind of division of labor was agreed upon: Nansen was to ensure political negotiations and coordination, while the ILO was to provide employment.<sup>619</sup> This arrangement would come into force on January 1, 1925.

The Armenian refugee settlement scheme in Sardarapat, which became known as the Nansen or Yerevan scheme, along with other refugee settlement schemes such as the one for the Armenian refugees in Syria, would be entrusted to Nansen and the ILO and discussed in Geneva as well as in diverse European capitals throughout the 1920s. Soon the discussions of both settlements would become intertwined, and involve the USSR and Soviet Armenia as well as the French mandatory authorities in Syria. It is the emergence of the entangled story of these two settlements that we attempt to demonstrate. It reached its climax at the beginning of the 1930s and is studied in detail in Part IV of this dissertation. In order to understand more clearly the origins of the ensuing competition for the Armenian refugees and the emergence of the two competing settlement schemes, we must briefly present all the actors claiming authority over the refugees and their refugee policies.

### **Whose refugees? The “Republic of Refugees,” the two Armenian delegations, Soviet Armenia, the USSR, and the Armenian refugees**

In the aftermath of WWI, the short-lived Armenian Republic (1918–1920) was flooded by almost half a million destitute refugees, who needed to be settled, sheltered, and fed daily.<sup>620</sup> In 1920, the total population of Soviet Armenia was only 720,000 persons.<sup>621</sup> Thousands of others were spread all over the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East. According to the estimates of Aram Andonian, the founder of the Nubar Library of Paris, Syria and Lebanon hosted 87,750 Armenian refugees, followed by Greece with 63,934, Bulgaria with 15,889, Istanbul with 8,869, Mesopotamia with 8,000, and France with 30,000.<sup>622</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid.

<sup>620</sup> There were 310,835 Ottoman refugees and 271,041 destitute locals, Hovhannisian, *The Republic*, 126.

<sup>621</sup> Hovik Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk Arenchutyyunnere ev Hayrenadardzutyune, 1920-1980* [Homeland-Diaspora Relations and Repatriation, 1920-1980] (Yerevan, 1985), 48.

<sup>622</sup> He counted a total of 215,000 refugees outside of USSR. Out of this total 215,000, 45,000 were women and children, elderly and disabled. Whose transfer to Yerevan was undesirable since they needed continuous support. Out of the remaining 100,000, ¼ were tradesmen and craftsmen. See in DNA, fond Andonian, 31 décembre 1923.

The war and successive bad harvests had also put the local populations in a difficult situation. The burden of several hundred thousand unsheltered and unemployed refugees was enough in itself to cause an economic crisis; even in normal times, it would have been impossible to satisfy the needs of these refugees.<sup>623</sup> With limited economic resources, the Armenian authorities could do little to improve the situation. Indeed, they could not have managed the situation without external support from various sources, the most distinguished ones being the NER and the Lord Mayor's Fund.<sup>624</sup>

In April–May 1919, thanks to efforts by NER, the economic situation gradually improved. Given the improved conditions, the Armenian government quickly positioned itself as the *homeland* for *all* the Armenian refugees issuing a call on June 10, 1919, for “repatriation.”<sup>625</sup> Special delegates were immediately sent to Baku, Mosul, Baghdad, and Aleppo to organize repatriations.<sup>626</sup> What was behind this untimely decision to start repatriation when the current refugees and locals were far from being self-sufficient? Was it the realization that repatriation and refugee issues had led to the large-scale humanitarian relief projects in the Republic that largely contributed to the country's development? Was it an attempt to use the charity organizations to cover the repatriation costs and the initial settlement costs, thus gaining more labor at no additional expense? While all these considerations certainly played a role, there was another reason too. In the first half of 1919, Armenian leaders were still hopeful that some Ottoman Armenian regions would be attached to the Armenian Republic. Some of these regions, especially those just across the border (Basen, Alashkert, and Bayazet), had never been under Turkish rule and had vast, fertile lands that could be quickly cultivated to meet the refugees' needs. Thus, refugees could be settled in these areas to claim the land and use their labor to feed themselves and others. The involvement of so many charity organizations, on the

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According to other estimates, the biggest concentration was, by far in Syria with about 150,000 refugees, followed by Greece and Cyprus with 79,000, see in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 53.

<sup>623</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 130. For the detailed statistic of the poor and destitute refugees in both urban and rural areas, see HAA, fond 114, list 1, file 284, 1-4, 28 December 1922 – 14 March 1923.

<sup>624</sup> On the activities of these organizations in Armenia, see D. Rodogno, *Dark on Earth*; Jo Laycock, “‘Saving the Remnant’ or Building Socialism? The Lord Mayor's Fund in Early Soviet Armenia,” *Moving the Social*, 57 (2017). According to the Armenian archives NER spent over 40,000 dollars, supporting 25,000 orphans, 25 agricultural colonies, 50 mechanical workshops, and providing 25 tractors, see in HAA, fond 114, list 1, file 283, 1-3, 8 December 1922 - 30 December 1923.

<sup>625</sup> It shall be noted that the term used by the refugees and wider Armenian circles was not “repatriation” [hayrendardzutyun], but “nergatht,” which meant ingathering. Compared to repatriation which meant to return to one's homeland, it is rather a neutral word. After all Republic of Armenia was not the homeland of the Ottoman Armenians. In this dissertation, I have opted to use the word “repatriation.” For more on different terms employed by both the refugees and the authorities, see Eduard Melkonian, *Hay Gaghtakanutyun: Terminneri Patmutunits*, [Armenian Emigration: A History of the Terms] (Yerevan, 2017); Armenuhi Stepanyan, *XX Dari Hayrenadardyutyune Hayoc Inknyan Hamakargum* [The Repatriation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Armenian Identity] (Yerevan: 2010), 31; HAA, fond 199, list 1, file 32, 349.

<sup>626</sup> HAA, fond 200, list 1, file 237, 95, June 5; Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 31.

other hand, meant that this task could be accomplished as quickly and as smoothly as possible.<sup>627</sup>

On June 10, 1920, a decision was taken to open a 20 million dollar “loan for independence.” Prime Minister Khatisyan himself led the campaign, which was closed at the beginning of September 1920, with great success.<sup>628</sup> On August 27, 1920, the government made yet another decision by opening a diaspora section “to study the situation in the colonies, to connect them with the *homeland* to use the financial and moral forces for the benefits of the Armenian state.”<sup>629</sup> It is safe to claim that the potential of the various Armenian communities was effectively realized, and efforts were made to channel their resources to Armenia. Refugees were central to that goal. It was unsurprising that the DNA, which claimed to represent the Ottoman Armenians saw its own “monopoly” over the refugees threatened by the actions of the HHA.

The competition between the two was nothing new. If initially, it had been for forming (and governing) an Armenian state, a “United and Free Armenia,” later it was for claiming authority over the refugees.<sup>630</sup> Furthermore, according to Vahan Papazian (Koms), a leading ARF member and member of the Bureau, Russian Armenians were regarded as self-proclaimed guarantors for the Ottoman Armenian cause.<sup>631</sup> After the Russian revolution of 1917, the gap between the two sides became even wider when the Russian Armenians became caught up in the revolutionary fervor leaving the Ottoman Armenians to deal with the refugee settlement alone.<sup>632</sup>

In 1919, the DNA initiated a pan-Armenian congress with the aim of including ARF members in order to become truly *national*. This delegation considered itself the only legitimate body to claim the rights of the Ottoman Armenians. The existence of the refugees justified its mandate. Indeed, Nubar, the DNA head, even declared openly to the Western representatives that the representatives of the Armenian Republic could speak only on behalf of the Russian

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<sup>627</sup> HAA, fond 200, list 1, file 237, 43-44, from Khatisyan to General Thomson, March 27, 1919.

<sup>628</sup> Simon Vratsian, *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun* [Republic of Armenia] (Paris, 1928), 448. It shall be noted, that the collected money never reached Armenia or the refugees in Armenia. In December 1920 Armenia was Sovietized and Khatisyan himself instructed not to send it to Soviet Armenia, the funds were not returned to their donors either. See in Own Corres. “Hayastani Handep” [Toward Armenia], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 26, 1922, 2.

<sup>629</sup> HAA, 200, list 1, file 448, 182 cited in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 45-46. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>630</sup> Not only these two groups had two competing projects for a legitimate *homeland*, the things got worse with the formation of the Armenian Republic whose existence gradually came to be regarded as an obstacle for the establishment of the so much desired “United and Free Armenia,” by claiming Ottoman Armenian vilayets. It had made further Armenian territorial demands difficult. Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:45.

<sup>631</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 2:446.

<sup>632</sup> Simon Vratsyan, *Hayastane Bolshevikiyan Murji ev Terkakan Sali Mijev* [Armenia Between the Bolshevik Hammer and The Turkish Anvil] (Beirut, 1953); Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 2:446.

Armenians, while his delegation and himself were the only legitimate representatives of the Ottoman refugees.<sup>633</sup> Tensions between the two delegations came to a head after the signature of the Sèvres Treaty (August 10, 1920), which was signed solely by the representatives of the HHA. In order to solve the legitimacy crisis, Nubar initiated a referendum.<sup>634</sup>

Meantime, the HHA in Paris gradually transformed into a diplomatic mission, staffed by high-level, influential Armenian and foreign advisors.<sup>635</sup> Ironically, the HHA was soon also deprived of its legitimacy, as just months after the signing of the Sèvres Treaty, Armenia was Sovietized by the Red Army on December 2, 1920. Unsurprisingly, the very first resolution of the new Soviet rulers was to announce that all the Armenian delegations abroad were illegal (December 6).<sup>636</sup> Both delegations suddenly found themselves in exile, but with a firm determination to continue their work. Whom did they claim to represent? As this existential question was being posed, answers were readily found in the presence of the thousands of Armenian refugees dispersed from the Caucasus to the Middle East, Europe, and America.

During the following years, central Soviet rule gradually increased at the expense of the internal autonomy of the republics, which were gradually deprived of the freedom to conduct independent foreign and trade relations. As of 1922, centralization was complete, and Moscow decided on all important matters.<sup>637</sup> This fresh reality was considered positive by the new Armenian authorities. Sargis Lukashin, chairman of the Councils of People's Commissars of Armenia (prime minister), thought that, at least, it would bring economic advantages for Armenia.<sup>638</sup> As of mid-1922, Soviet delegates were increasingly invited to participate in the international meetings, the first one being the Genova Congress,<sup>639</sup> where the Soviet Armenian delegation was presented along with the DNA and HHA. Thus, the Armenians were now represented abroad by three distinguished delegations.

Despite warnings from the new Soviet rulers, the DNA and HHA continued their activities silently. The ARF-led HHA in particular, which had presented the Armenian Republic in the past, endeavored to keep its political and legal basis unchanged. The Allied forces seemed to facilitate its job because when both delegations arrived in London in March 1921, the HHA

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<sup>633</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:165.

<sup>634</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:98, 168.

<sup>635</sup> The members of the delegation included Aharonyan, Ohanjanyan, Papajanyan, Papazian and later also Khatisyan. All held ministerial positions in the Republic of Armenia; Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:100-101.

<sup>636</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:117.

<sup>637</sup> HAA, Fond 1, list, 2. File 3, 11 cited in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 193.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>639</sup> This congress aimed to conclude peace treaties with Germany and the Soviets, who were not invited to the Paris Peace talks. Instead, Germany and Soviets concluded a separate agreement.

was told by the Foreign Office to continue their work as usual.<sup>640</sup> After all, it stemmed from the interests of the Allies to use this chaos to ignore the Armenian demands altogether that did not fit anymore in their politics. On another occasion, when the HHA asked for permission to participate in the Lausanne conference, both the British and the French told them that the DNA was already present, representing both Ottoman and Russian Armenians.<sup>641</sup> This was not the victory of the DNA, rather a move by the Allies to avoid both.

Although, as of July 1921, both delegations had joined forces under the banner of “Les delegations Arméniennes réunies” for the external public, the move neither solved internal tensions nor stopped the confusion. Both delegations sent joint memoranda as well as separate petitions. Moreover, the divergent aims of the delegations were apparent. For example, at the London conference, HHA demanded help to fight against the Soviet rule, while the DNA complained about the French evacuation from Cilicia.<sup>642</sup>

As the new Bolshevik leaders settled in Armenia, the ARF still cherished hopes of regaining control by organizing a popular uprising in February (1921). Although it was unsuccessful, Soviet rule remained largely contested until the end of 1921. Meantime, the HHA continued its work, as usual, meeting different state representatives and discussing offers for the construction of railways, exploitation of minerals, and development of agriculture in Armenia. Offers came from everywhere (Britain, Switzerland, Holland, and Romania). It was noted bitterly that during the whole time, France was the only country that remained indifferent.<sup>643</sup>

Many Armenians continued to travel with the identity cards issued by the HHA. Moreover, HHA members and former high officials continued to enjoy diplomatic status.<sup>644</sup> The joint declaration of the French, Italian, and Greek representatives in October 1921, which acknowledged Soviet authority only on the territories recognized by the locals, was quickly interpreted by the HHA as a sign that they should continue their work quietly.<sup>645</sup> No wonder then, that a strong animosity developed between the ARF and the Soviet authorities. The ARF effectively ran a parallel state to the Soviet one at a time when the latter remained largely marginalized and isolated. We shall see throughout the chapters of this dissertation how the rivalry grew to reach its climax at the beginning of the 1930s.

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<sup>640</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:155.

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid*, 3:129.

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid*, 3:169.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid*, 3:148.

<sup>644</sup> Gradually these identity cards were not recognized first by Turkey, followed by Germany, and later others. Later Armenian refugees received Nansen passports, which also became illegal after a large number of such passports were obtained by the Bolsheviks, *Ibid*, 3:156.

<sup>645</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:155.

Although the hope that Soviet rule would be only temporary faded slowly, the determination to carry on the activities of the HHA did not. On the contrary, there was a clear conviction among the HHA that the refugees and other well-established Armenian communities should get ready for a Soviet-free future; intellectuals and officers were to be prepared for this eventuality.<sup>646</sup> The HHA also initiated a series of “pan-Armenian” conferences, which unsurprisingly did not include any Soviet Armenian representatives, and a failed attempt to create a pan-Armenian diasporic center, which we shall discuss in detail in Part II of this dissertation. These initiatives failed due to the opposition of the DNA, the Ramkavars, and Soviet Armenia, all of whom felt that their own authority over the refugees was threatened and that the ARF was attempting to create *a nation without territoriality*. Essayi Karikian<sup>647</sup> penned an article devoted to the topic where he explained that ARF had its own “delegation apart from the *national interests* and that its only preoccupation was the strengthening of the position of this delegation.” It was clear that any congress without the participation of Soviet Armenia would mean forming an opposing bloc.<sup>648</sup>

Needless to say, all these initiatives were closely monitored by the Soviet authorities, and counteractions were quickly put in place. Myasnikyan, the chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of Armenia, had clearly stated that *those fighting around the issue of refugees fought against the Armenian state and thus against the refugees*.<sup>649</sup> Instead, Myasnikyan addressed the refugees directly:

Armenian refugees, if you wish to live peacefully and happily in your *homeland*, you shall have a *pro-Soviet attitude*... We accept refugees in the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia), and Northern Caucasus (because Armenia does not have enough lands), with the condition that their costs are fully covered by so many organizations active abroad.<sup>650</sup>

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<sup>646</sup> Ibid, 3:149-151, 153. The author recalls these events under the subtitle “HH Delegation’s Fight for Existence.”

<sup>647</sup> Essayi Karikian attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> HOK Congress in Armenia in the autumn of 1923 on behalf of the AGBU and DNA, and remained over-impressed by the achievements there. He remained vocal in making the outside world know about it by running a series of columns in the *Suriakan Mamul* from spring 1924. Soon he became the trade representative of Soviet Armenia abroad and received a mandate by the Soviet Armenian authorities to be the advisor of the Economic Council, to help exploit the minerals and mines, negotiating and bringing foreign investment to Armenia. See in HAA, fond 1, list 4-25, 1924 year, 49, signed Balayan, N:278, November 9, 1932.

<sup>648</sup> Karikian, “Ramkavar Kusaktc. Patgavorakan Joghove Inchu Dem Kvearkecav Gaghtakanakan Hamagumarin” [Why Did Ramkavar Depute Council Voted Against the Pan-Arm. Congress?] *Suriakan Mamul* April 1, 1924, 1.

<sup>649</sup> Editor., “Hamagaghutayin Hamagumare” [The Pan-Armenian Congress] (c), *Suriakan Mamul* April 1, 1924, 2. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>650</sup> “A. Myasnikyani Tesautunnere Hayastani Kyanki Masin” [Myasnikyan’s Theories About the Life in Armenia], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 8, 1924, 1. (Emphasized by the author).



Soviet Armenian authorities interpreted the organization of such a pan-Armenian congress as yet another ARF attempt to create a non-territorial state by claiming the refugees.<sup>651</sup> This, they felt, needed to be avoided.

Ramkavars, in contrast to the ARF, chose to support the reconstruction of Soviet Armenia, strengthening the links between Armenia and the colonies, as well as supporting repatriations. They had chosen to call the Armenian refugees to refrain from any apparent political activity in the colonies abroad, instead cultivating friendly relations with the local populations – such a policy overlapped with Soviet interests. The latter propagated the same message, albeit increasingly inciting refugees to participate actively in the local national liberation movements. Soon, Soviet Armenia capitalized on the friendly attitude of the Ramkavars and used it as a platform for the activities of the Hayastni Ognutyun Komite (HOK, Armenian Aid Committee). The HOK was created in September 1921 as an “apolitical” relief agency to channel funds to the starving refugees in Armenia. However, it was quickly transformed into a useful propaganda tool for Moscow.

Arguably, HOK had two directors; a high-level Soviet bureaucrat, Yerzenkyan, the Minister of Agriculture, and a highly respected intellectual and writer, Hovhanness Tumanyan. It was obvious that the latter had been chosen in order to appeal to wider Armenian circles.

The founding covenant of HOK clearly stated that the aim was to unite all the Armenian elements for the reconstruction of the country and to fight against anti-Soviet propaganda “abroad.”<sup>652</sup> Soviet leaders had repeatedly admitted that over and above HOK’s financial aid, it was the other role (fighting anti-Soviet propaganda) that was more appreciated.<sup>653</sup>

Quickly it became apparent that the idea of the pan-Armenian congress disturbed not only the Soviet authorities in Armenia but also in Moscow, albeit for a different reason. A letter from Chicherin to Stalin on September 1, 1924, which aimed to hinder both the organization of such a congress and the consolidation of ARF, was telling. Chicherin informed Stalin about the planned pan-Armenian congress against which Soviet authorities had done nothing but needed to act immediately by hindering it through press campaigns since it could “renew the Armenian-Turkish confrontation under the protection of the imperialists.” Chicherin also offered a solution, “As a response, we can speed up and host a few thousands of Armenian refugees in the Caucasus. Nansen wishes to bring 20,000 refugees, it is too much, we can handle 4–5,000.

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<sup>651</sup> HHA, fond 1, list 5, file 48, 44-50, “ARF and Soviet Armenia,” January 5, 1925 to October 27, 1925.

<sup>652</sup> HAA, fond 178, list 1, file 249, 21-26. Also Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 152.

<sup>653</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 152. In October 1923, for the first-time 40 delegates were invited from aboard to attend HOK’s Congress in Yerevan to witness the Soviet achievements. *Hravirak* (HOK organ) 1925, N:1, 27.

It will have a strong impact (on the Armenians). Since Armenian refugees have difficulties in Greece, it is a good opportunity.”<sup>654</sup>

Recently, the authorities in Greece had become significantly less welcoming toward the Armenian refugees since Greece was overwhelmed by over a million refugees of its own as a result of the LoN orchestrated “population exchange.” Not only had the Greek authorities demanded that the LoN should remove the 60,000 Armenian refugees from Greece but had also started deportations to put pressure on both the LoN and the Armenian political leaders.<sup>655</sup>

The Armenian refugees stranded in Greece had, in turn, asked the Soviet authorities to find a solution for them, expressing willingness to repatriate. Some texts preserved in the Armenian National Archives are quite revealing in this regard, for they are written using Marxist vocabulary.<sup>656</sup> Not only were the refugees ready to be repatriated, but they were also ready for any sacrifice, “We are workers, peasants, and artisans ready for any kind of sacrifice only to end our misery as soon as possible.”<sup>657</sup> As much as the text of the plea was revealing, so was the reply of the Soviet authorities:

Our government is ready to accept people like you – workers and peasants, although the lack of enough land does not allow us to accept *everyone*. You must know that our country is in the process of reconstruction, and only those who *become citizens* can participate in the reconstruction.<sup>658</sup>

This message makes it clear that not *all* Armenian refugees would be welcomed. A vigorous vetting was in place to select the potential repatriates. There were three main types of vetting; special skills, political party affiliation, and ideology.<sup>659</sup> Silk, tobacco, and cotton cultivators were especially encouraged to leave for Soviet “homeland” since the country was

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<sup>654</sup> HHA, Fond 1, file 4-27, 05 January 1924 to 12 December 1924, file 12-13, from Chicherin to Stalin, N:1104/ChS September 1, 1924.

<sup>655</sup> On the Armenian refugees in Greece see, Matthias Bjørnlund & Iben Hendel Philipsen, “Sorrow is Turned to Joy: A Play about the 1909 Adana Massacres, Staged by Armenian Genocide Survivors in Greece,” *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 1:1 (2014), 71-86; Merih Erol, “Refugees, Migrants, Citizens: Armenians in Greece from the Interwar Years until Today,” (Online Conference, 2021). As well as HAA, 113, list 3, file 259, 15-17, cited in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 90. Armenian prelacy of Athens, September 1924; LoN archives, C1425-321-Ra-406-1-26-1, Armenian refugees in Greece, Communication from the Greek representative, Geneva, June 12, 1924. On the deportations, see Victoria Abrahamyan, “Events in Greece as a Defining Moment for the Armenians in Syria,” (Paper presented at the conference The Global 1922, April, 2022).

<sup>656</sup> HAA; 178, list 1, file 975, 19.

<sup>657</sup> Meliksetian, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 92.

<sup>658</sup> HAA; 113, list 3, file 54, 34, Lukashin, July 1924, cited in *ibid*, 92. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>659</sup> HAA, fond 178, list 1, file 54, 10 ; Ghazakhetsian, *Dashnaksutyune ev Khorherdayin Ishxanutyunere* [ARF and the Soviet Authorities] (Yerevan, 1999), 24. The profiles of the first 4,167 newcomers were as follows, 50% artisans, 12% tobacco workers, 16% silk weavers, and 2% intellectuals, HAA, fond 113, list 3, file 419-418, 153, 147, 28, 20.

believed to have the potential for these products.<sup>660</sup> Later, a prominent communist historian wrote:

Thanks to these newcomers, the Republic obtained highly skilled specialists. The refugee life, full of hardship, had turned them into resilient and hard-working elements. This character, coupled with the caring Soviet attitude, guaranteed their quick success in a brief period of time.<sup>661</sup>

It meant that, in addition to the categories mentioned above, preference was given to the *neediest*, who would be happy with minimum support and determined to succeed, and for whom all the related costs would be paid in advance. The repatriation process would demonstrate that Soviet Armenia was the only safe haven for these refugees.<sup>662</sup>

It must be said that Soviet interest in the Armenian refugees had emerged before 1924 and the pan-Armenian congress. Indeed, the Soviets had been initiating similar initiatives to those of the ARF to tap into the potential offered by the refugees. Their first calls, issued in July 1921, targeted the Armenian colonies of Iran and Iraq.<sup>663</sup> At the end of 1921, barely a year after coming to power, Soviet authorities initiated the first repatriation from the Ba'quba refugee camp in Iraq.<sup>664</sup> Earlier, in June 1919, the Armenian Catholicos of Edjmiatsin had suggested that the ARF government should repatriate these refugees from Iraq in view of their harsh living conditions. However, the ARF government rejected the plea, claiming that the country was not ready to accept new immigrants.<sup>665</sup> Indeed, the Soviet initiative was probably also directed against the ARF, who had been unwilling or unable to repatriate the Ba'quba refugees. As a result, about 9,000 refugees arrived in Soviet Armenia from Ba'quba. The transfer was facilitated by Soviet diplomats in Tehran.<sup>666</sup> Although it was a total failure and most (7,000) would succumb to malaria and starvation,<sup>667</sup> Soviet historians boasted about “this bold step to care for their own refugees, when no one else did, and who would otherwise die in the deserts

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<sup>660</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 103.

<sup>661</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 104, also NAA, fond, 113, list 1, file 127, 1-6, “The Refugee Issue,” June 1925, cited in Gatrell, “Displacing and Re-Placing Population in the Two World Wars: Armenia and Poland compared,” *Contemporary European History*, vol. 16:4 (2007), 511-527.

<sup>662</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 104.

<sup>663</sup> Meliksetyan, *Sovetakan Ishxanutyunneri Arajin Kaylere Hay Gaghtakanutyun Harcum* [The First Steps of the Soviet Authorities in Refugee Settlement] (Yerevan, 1969), 3-20.

<sup>664</sup> More on this see, Jo Laycock, *Imagining Armenia*.

<sup>665</sup> These refugees were employed by the British to work on the construction of the roads and railways, to guard oil fields against a small payment. In the autumn of 1920, most of them were transferred to Naher al-Omar. In March 1921, the British announced there was no financial support for them. Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 79.

<sup>666</sup> HAA, fond 114, list 1, file 16, 89 in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 85.

<sup>667</sup> HAA, fond 112/8, file 6, N: 76, 30 October 1922, in Sonya Mirzoyan, “Pastaghter Hay Gaghtakanneri Teghavorman Khndirneri Veraberyal (1921-1925)” [Documents Regarding the Settlement of the Armenian Refugees, 1921-1925], *Banber Hayastani Arxivneri*, 2 (2009), 159-173, 162.

of Mesopotamia.”<sup>668</sup> Death in the *homeland* was held to be less painful. The report of the Ministry of Interior about the conditions of the refugees is quite revealing as to why the Mesopotamia refugees were repatriated in such a rush. The political side of the issue was emphasized in particular: these refugees had lived for a long time in tents under British control, deprived of any opportunity for economic endeavor or autonomy. They had been the main concern for both the domestic and foreign press, all of whom had devoted special editorials to the issue. Moreover, they had been subjected “to the *special attention of the great men*” (*mets ayrer*), *in order to create a national home for them*. We have now taken this huge number of refugees from their hands (ARF?) and resettled them... without elementary care. We now need to save their lives.”<sup>669</sup>

Significantly, the first repatriations were made at a time when the presence of the refugees was still acutely felt. The famous Bolshevik Ordzunikidze had announced during the Baku congress (December 1920) that it was very difficult to build a government in Armenia, which was about to become a “republic for refugees.”<sup>670</sup> Yet, the second Soviet call for repatriation was issued in early 1922. It was also quite explicit about what was expected from the refugees. “It is hoped that the different Armenian communities will use their potential in the revival and reconstruction of Soviet Armenia. It is the only way that they (these communities) will be able to strive.”<sup>671</sup> In December 1922, it was promptly decided that repatriation would only be organized for the Armenian refugees abroad, leaving the refugees residing in the other Soviet countries where they were.<sup>672</sup>

The Armenian refugees of Syria and Lebanon were also considered for repatriation as “Armenians of Europe are mostly intellectuals, *while the real people are in Syria*, where there is also a strong youth movement, similar to Egypt.”<sup>673</sup> Nevertheless, since repatriations were financed by third parties (AGBU in particular), the refugees of Syria did not represent a priority for the latter for several reasons. Instead, priority was given to the refugees of Greece, Bulgaria, Istanbul, and Mesopotamia, as well as the adult orphans (about 30,000). All of them had fled from the Eastern vilayets and were neither familiar with the climate of the new countries nor with the new environment and suffered the most. Whereas those in Syria and Lebanon came

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<sup>668</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 83.

<sup>669</sup> HAA, fond 112/8, file 6, N: 66-68, in Sonya Mirzoyan, “Pastaghter Hay,” 163. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>670</sup> Martuni (Myasnikyan) *Kusaktsutyunnere Gaghutahayutyany Mej* [Political Parties in the Armenian Diasporic Communities] (Tiflis, 1924), 61.

<sup>671</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 56.

<sup>672</sup> HAA, fond 1, list 1, file 371, 31 in Sonya Mirzoyan, “Pastaghter Hay,” 159.

<sup>673</sup> HAA archives, 1, list 4-25, 58- 61, From Shahverdyan (Istanbul) to Yerevan, 1924 (no date). (Emphasized by the author).

mostly from Cilicia, and were, thus, familiar not only with the climate and the region but the living conditions and the general environment. In addition, they enjoyed the sympathetic attitude of the Syrian and French authorities and wished to remain where they were, closer to Cilicia and with the hope of returning to their homes one day.<sup>674</sup> Although the Soviet authorities did try to repatriate selective specialists also from Syria, especially those who were tobacco cultivators and silkworm breeders, their plans were twice hindered by unforeseen calamities in Soviet Armenia (the flooding of Yerevan, and the earthquake in Shirak).<sup>675</sup> For one reason or another, only 25 refugees would leave Syria for Soviet Armenia during the entire interwar period.<sup>676</sup> Furthermore, even if there were negotiations with the Soviet authorities, it was a common understanding that not all the refugees could be transferred to Armenia which was limited both in space and resources. This is the reason why as early as 1925, Pashalian, the secretary general of the Central Refugee Council in Paris wrote to Sahak II to consider “the possibility of transferring 5-6000 refugees from Greece to Syria... Some of them we shall divide between France and Syria.”<sup>677</sup> Clearly, Syria was favored over France since it was believed that the assimilation of the refugees in France would take place in greater speed.<sup>678</sup>

Why were the repatriation calls attractive to the Armenian colonies? It was not only because of the difficult conditions that refugees faced in many places but for other reasons, too. After the establishment of the Communist regime in Armenia, three immediate political tasks were carried out: establishment of an order, channeling the widespread nationalist feelings towards communist goals, and ensuring the dominance of the pro-regime elements.<sup>679</sup> One of the most efficient methods of achieving these tasks was the policy of so-called *korenizatsiia* (rooting, or indigenization).<sup>680</sup> It was implemented by staffing the local government with Armenians, encouraging the use of the Armenian language in public administration and as the main teaching language in schools, and adapting communist methods to the local customs. All these efforts

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<sup>674</sup> DNA, fond Andonian, 31 décembre 1923.

<sup>675</sup> The funds of about 7,427 dollars raised for the repatriation of Syrian refugees were returned back to AGBU. Edourd Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent Union in Soviet Armenia, 1923-1937*, trans. Artashes Emin (Fundamental Armeniology, N:1:9, 2019), 42-43, 34.

<sup>676</sup> 25 men traveled by cars from Aleppo to Baghdad, from there to Tehran with the aim to reach Yerevan, “Arabkirtsii Gaghtakanner Yerevan Kmeknen” [Refugees from Arabkir Enter Yerevan], *Arev*, August 14, 1924, 2.

<sup>677</sup> Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 258.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, *The Impact of Soviet Policies in Armenia* (Brill, 1962), 37.

<sup>680</sup> More on this see, T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 52:2 (1994), 414-452; On Armenia see Maike Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia,” *Slavic Review* 74:1 (2015), 9-31.

made the Soviet rule Armenian in its form and communist in its content.<sup>681</sup> Unsurprisingly, *rooting* proved popular; many intellectuals committed their support, seeing that Armenia was governed by the Armenians, at least on the surface.<sup>682</sup> It helped to earn the sympathy of many Armenian refugees abroad, who watched with astonishment at the way their language was promoted as the main state language, and how all the main positions were occupied by the Armenians who ran the state. This was one of the main reasons that repatriation calls were received positively.

However, not all the refugees or their leaders favored the repatriations. The repatriation calls and the conditions imposed (to cover all the expenses) were widely criticized, especially in the ARF press. The latter maintained that, in reality, it meant “to shut the doors of Armenia in front of the refugees, as no refugee could possibly satisfy these conditions.”<sup>683</sup>

An apolitical paper from Istanbul devoted several articles to the issue. First, it stated, “we must be careful and refrain from transferring all our orphans and refugees to Armenia; they can also be useful elsewhere if they are safe.... We shall instead try to settle these refugees in their current locations by finding a common ground with the local authorities.”<sup>684</sup> A month later, the same paper put it explicitly, “there is no freedom in Soviet Armenia; therefore, there is a country but not a *homeland* for us.”<sup>685</sup>

Shaverdyan, the Soviet Armenian delegate, suggested accepting small numbers of refugees from elsewhere, too, in order to make an impression on the wider Armenian circles. He stated, “The repatriation news has already created a big interest in all the Armenian colonies. Nevertheless, local Armenian national and refugee committees are not very satisfied since *their existence is threatened without the refugees... therefore, they do nothing to help*. The only force that truly supports the repatriation is ironically the ARF, which by doing so aims to create a heavy burden on the Armenian state.”<sup>686</sup> A year later, Ulianov, the USSR ambassador in Greece, also complained that ARF representatives created obstacles to repatriation and were even supported in their efforts by the LoN’s representative.<sup>687</sup>

Nevertheless, communism had undoubtedly created a paradoxical situation that inspired many Armenians in the colonies to consider Soviet Armenia as a *national homeland*.<sup>688</sup> The

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<sup>681</sup> Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, *The Impact of Soviet Policies*, 37.

<sup>682</sup> Bagrat Borian, *Hayastan: Mijazgayin Divanagituyune ev KHSHM* [Armenia: The International Relations and the USSR] (Yerevan, 2018), 1:178, 212.

<sup>683</sup> Masuryan (S. Vratsian), “Bacek Demere” [Open the Doors], *Jakatamart* (Istanbul), April 16, 1924, 2.

<sup>684</sup> Byuzand Qechian, *Verjon Lur* (Istanbul), June 21, 1924, cited by Melksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 314.

<sup>685</sup> *Verjn Lur*, July 16, 1924, in *ibid.* (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>686</sup> HAA 113, list 3, file 204, 15; file 517, 62-63 November 11, 1925. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>687</sup> Melksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 314.

<sup>688</sup> Karlen Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki Patmutuyun* [History of Armenian Diaspora] (Yerevan, 2004), 51.

other paradox stemmed from the fact that Soviet Armenia needed to gain the sympathy of the Armenian refugees in the colonies to gain legitimacy. The refugees, for their part, looked at this tiny republic as an inspiration for the organization of their communities and national life throughout the 1920s.

Soviet Armenian authorities were aware that their policy toward the refugees was predominantly “national” (*azgayin*), while their agents were busy propagating that “Armenia is ‘free’ and entirely ‘Armenian’ (*zut haykakan*).”<sup>689</sup> This situation would not persist because several leading Armenian politicians (Bekzadyan, Solovyan, Karabekyan, and Mikayelyan) sent a petition to the Armenian central Communist Party in November 1925. They argued that a “national” policy toward the refugees was unacceptable since it was against international principles. In addition, the financial aid received from abroad was insufficient and could not justify this “wrong” policy. Rather than making the Armenian refugees part of the international Workers’ movement, the enemies of the Armenians were using these refugees for their own interests. They also mentioned how the LoN, Nansen, the Lord Mayor’s Fund, and others had claimed that, if Armenia had not been under Soviet rule, it would have received important funds.<sup>690</sup> This petition signaled a change in Soviet policies toward the refugees from 1925 onward, its impact will be discussed in the later chapters. Curiously, it was the Armenian communist leaders behind the change and not Moscow, as one may have expected.

The discussion on the transformation of the HOK in Yerevan upon the reception of the petition is especially revealing. Two members insisted on either dissolving the HOK or making it political, while the other two members opposed politicization. “If HOK aimed at the reconstruction of Armenia with the participation of *all the Armenians*, then it needs to remain apolitical. If we consider that the ideas of *homeland, Armenia, and nation* are exciting for the colonies – then we shall continue to act.”<sup>691</sup> In the end, the bloc that favored politicization won.

Arguably, Soviet Armenian leaders interpreted the “nation” in Marxist terms. The nation was a historical fact that had a beginning and an end. Its inception was the formation of the bourgeoisie, and the end was socialism, where a “national homeland” was to be replaced by a “socialist great homeland.” In addition, there was a need to fight against the ARF-propagated “Free and United Armenia.” In this regard, the declaration of a Soviet Armenian leader (Bekzadyan) was quite illustrative, “It is necessary to not gather all the Armenians in Soviet

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<sup>689</sup> HAA, Fond 1, list 5, file 47a, 1 -27, Letter of Bekzadyan, Solovyan, Karabekyan and Mikayelyan to the communist central party, Berlin, November 25, 1925.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid.

<sup>691</sup> Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 35 -36. (Emphasized by the author).

Armenia in order to fight against the idea of a United and Free Armenia in the consciousness of the Armenian masses. We, therefore, shall disperse the 300,000 Armenian refugees in Russia.”<sup>692</sup> Soviet authorities, on the other hand, wished to repress all kinds of national aspirations. They were also surprised why none of these refugees agreed to be relocated to the other parts of the waste “socialist homeland,” insisting instead that they should be settled in Armenia.<sup>693</sup> It must be noted that of all the Soviet Republics, the Soviet Armenian authorities were much more fanatical in these claims.<sup>694</sup>

“Repatriation” was interpreted in the same way. Instead of being a nation-gathering event, it was largely a political tool. Soviet authorities soon found the attitude of most of the refugees who considered Armenia a “homeland” for national and ethnic reasons, without endorsing communism, unacceptable.<sup>695</sup>

In parallel to the transformation of the HOK from an “apolitical” to a “political” tool in 1926,<sup>696</sup> the central government of Soviet Armenia decided that “All the public and national funds abroad shall be allocated solely to address the issue of refugees and the fundamental reconstruction of Soviet Armenia, which would solve the refugee issue by creating an economy for them.”<sup>697</sup> Thus, Soviet authorities ultimately connected the refugee issue with the reconstruction of Soviet Armenia, which would position it as the only legitimate homeland. In this sense, any competing project that could potentially become a “national home” or even a major refugee concentration, especially if such projects were led by the ARF, was deemed dangerous and undesirable.

Increasingly in HOK propaganda materials and reports, “Soviet Armenia” was being systematically replaced by “homeland.” For example, “Working masses shall regroup around HOK and prove the degree to which they are connected with the *homeland*,” “Let the future separate the two blocs – the *pro-homeland* and the ones against it,” and “The size of donations determines the extent to which *homeland* is appreciated.”<sup>698</sup>

The terms used by Soviet Armenian leaders to report about HOK activities abroad were equally telling, “HOK has regrouped around it the working masses to prepare their entrance to

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>693</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>694</sup> In our view, the fact that Soviet Armenia had sacrificed the most (historical homeland and territories) by Moscow to achieve allies (Turkey), resulted in the fanatical conviction that in order to restore the historical injustice, Armenians had to work tirelessly for the victory of socialism rather than for narrow nationalist goals.

<sup>695</sup> Dallakian, *Hay Spyurki*, 51.

<sup>696</sup> HOK’s new role, as a political instrument of the USSR abroad was soon recognized widely. In order to correct the situation Armenian authorities considered briefly in 1928 to rename it “Organization of Friends of Soviet Armenia” which nevertheless was never implemented.

<sup>697</sup> HAA, fond 178, list 1, file 418, 4-5.

<sup>698</sup> *Hravirak*, “HOKe Hunastansum” [HOK in Greece], N :1, 1925, 20. (Emphasized by the author).



the communist party,” and “HOK shall continue propaganda to further sever their ties with the ARF and other anti-communist groups, including charity organizations (the AGBU?).”<sup>699</sup> The fact that HOK branches abroad were directly governed and coordinated by the Comintern, while Yerevan monitored their activities, was not even hidden.

Simon Vratsian, the last prime minister of the Armenian Republic, openly claimed that “It was not the Armenian lands that Soviet authorities needed, but its refugees... as tools of the foreign politics... for Soviet authorities did everything to... divide the communities by using repatriation and playing on the patriotic feelings, dividing the entire community into two blocs—*pro-Armenian* and *pro-Soviet*.”<sup>700</sup> Karikian rebuffed those who insisted that Soviet Armenia wanted “our money but not our refugees,” arguing that, until now, “We have sent there our refugees and not our money.” He claimed that most of the concerns voiced about the refugees were not sincere since, “We know the conditions in Armenia, yet we do not want to give money and send our refugees there to starve.”<sup>701</sup>

Meanwhile, the works of leading figures in Soviet Armenia were printed one after another, along with numerous articles that appeared in the pages of *Khorhedayin Hayastan* (Soviet Armenia) in Yerevan and *Yerevan* in Paris.<sup>702</sup> These works endeavored to create more divisions among the Armenian communities abroad on the one hand and widen the gap between Soviet Armenia and the colonies on the other.<sup>703</sup> The logic behind this campaign was that any united front in the colonies would be directed at Soviet Armenia, and the belief that the Soviets would not occupy a prominent role in any such united front. The HOK had a leading role to play, with its publications claiming that “no central administration was needed for the colonies abroad in order to open a school or enhance the cultural activities.”<sup>704</sup> Instead, they said, it was enough to send all the funds and finances available to Soviet Armenia.<sup>705</sup> After all, Soviet Armenia was the only legal owner of all such funds and wills, and many fundraising events took place in the name of Armenia.<sup>706</sup>

It was also argued that, instead of continuously asking for help from foreigners, which left refugees in constant dependency and created a helpless image of a “poor Armenian,” it was

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<sup>699</sup> HAA, fond 1, list 8, file 15, 37, HKK Kentkom heads about the HOK’s reporting, February 24, 1928, cited in Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 231-232).

<sup>700</sup> Simon Vratsian, *Hayastane Bolshevikyan*, 187, 189. (Emphasized in the original).

<sup>701</sup> Karikian, “Arevtajay Chen Enduner” [Western Arm. No Not Accept], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 12, 1925, 1- 2.

<sup>702</sup> Martuni, *Hay Kusaksutyunnere*; Ashot Hovhannisyan, *Gaghutahay Khndirner* [Issues in the Armenian Colonies], (Yerevan, 1925); Artashes Karinyan, *Imperalsitakan Paterazme ev Hayastane* [Imperialist Struggle and Armenia] (Yerevan, 1924).

<sup>703</sup> Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 135.

<sup>704</sup> HAA, fond 1, list 5-47a, 1-27.

<sup>705</sup> Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 138.

<sup>706</sup> Ashot Hovhannisyan, *Gaghutahay Khendirner*, 7.

better to gather all the national treasures abroad, including church estates and the AGBU controlled wills to be used for the reconstruction of Armenia.<sup>707</sup>

Alboyajian, a renowned Armenian historian, contended that the “Soviet Armenian authorities failed to grasp the historic moment when the wider circles of the Armenians abroad had put aside their ideological convictions and stood next to Soviet Armenia, ready to support it with any means. Soviet authorities could easily make Yerevan the center for all Armenians abroad.”<sup>708</sup> Karlen Dallakyan, who was a high Soviet official, recognized that the exact opposite occurred. The Soviet Armenian authorities, who were not interested in *national unity* but in the *class struggle*, literally started a war against all other parties and actors, and often those who were sympathetic towards Soviet Armenia were put in the same category as those against it.<sup>709</sup> Needless to say, wider Armenian circles abroad, on the contrary, made it clear that the Armenian diaspora was sympathetic toward Soviet Armenia, not because of the class struggle but due to pure nationalist feelings and that the HOK’s main duty was not only to fundraise but to keep the national life alive in the colonies.<sup>710</sup> Both the Ramkavars and the ARF systematically started showing the HOK its “true place.”

The HOK had been formed to support the reconstruction of the *homeland* and its activities were limited geographically to Soviet Armenia. The refugee Armenians dispersed globally remained out of its scope of activity. By contrast, the AGBU acted in both Soviet Armenia and the colonies. Was there a need for the HOK to act for the Armenians abroad when there was the AGBU?<sup>711</sup> Mikayel Natanian pointed out the other evils brought about by the HOK’s systematic vocabulary of referring to the Armenian refugees as “workers” and “working classes,” which not only served to deter many refugees from being pro-Soviet Armenia but also provided a justification for presenting the Armenian refugees as communists, as happened in Syria and Lebanon. It was evident that the HOK’s propaganda was directed at weakening the ARF’s position, while in reality, it was having precisely the opposite effect. The propaganda enabled the ARF to consolidate its grip over the refugees who did not wish to be labeled “communists” just because they were sympathetic to Soviet Armenia.<sup>712</sup> Furthermore, HOK representatives were seen by many Armenians abroad as the representatives of Soviet Armenia, but the fact that neither HOK nor the Soviet Armenian authorities had any coherent policy

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<sup>707</sup> “Hayahavakman Gortse ev Azgayin Ktaknere” [the Ingathering of the Armenians and the Issue of the Wills], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 25, 1925, 1.

<sup>708</sup> Alboyajian, cited in Dallakian, *Hay Spyurki*, 103.

<sup>709</sup> Dallakian, *Hay Spyurki*, 102.

<sup>710</sup> Chobanian, in *Apaga*, Paris, cited by Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 103.

<sup>711</sup> Natanian, “Ramkavar Azat., Miutyune ev HOKE” [Ramkavars, AGBU, HOK], (b), *Arev*, March 23, 1928, 1.

<sup>712</sup> Natanian, “Ramkavar Azatakannere, H.B.E Miutyune ev HOKE,” (c), *Arev*, March 24, 1928, 1.

towards the refugees, other than communist propaganda and class struggle, made many disengage and consider this attitude as a “complete indifference.”<sup>713</sup>

The result of this confrontation was devastating for the Soviet authorities, too.<sup>714</sup> All the ARF efforts to reconcile were firmly turned down.<sup>715</sup> Soon, it was the turn of the Henschaks and Ramkavars, whom Soviet authorities accused of not providing enough financial support.<sup>716</sup> In particular, the AGBU was harshly criticized for spending only token funds in Armenia in sharp contrast to its spending elsewhere, particularly in Syria.<sup>717</sup> By the end of the 1920s, HOK lost all their Henschak and Ramkavar members, while relations with ARF had become non-existent.<sup>718</sup> Thus, while Soviet Armenia (as well as USSR) remained largely isolated internationally, the Soviet authorities added a new layer by alienating the few sympathetic elements in the Armenian diaspora as well. Even worse, Soviet Armenian leaders made it clear that, rather than focusing on ethnic belonging or homeland, they expected the Armenian colonies to join the local liberation movements or communist strikes. This was to serve as the only link between them and the homeland.<sup>719</sup> In the later chapters, we shall see the example of Syria, where the Armenian refugees were politicized due to this confrontation. The fact that the refugees were newcomers in these countries, who must fight for their fundamental rights such as everyday food, employment, and shelter, and endure anti-refugee discourse, was completely ignored. On the ideological level, the only acceptable attitude was to be pro-Soviet Armenia and promote class at the expense of nationalism. For the Soviet authorities, even the words “national” or “homeland” were too much and were not to be employed.<sup>720</sup>

However, Soviet historiography tends to idealize both the role of Soviet Armenia and Soviet efforts vis-à-vis the refugees, insisting that Soviet Armenia took care of the refugees by repatriating them for purely humanitarian reasons, as opposed to the previous ARF rulers, who had sought only to exploit the financial support for these refugees.<sup>721</sup> Were Soviet intentions really sincere and aimed at nothing else but saving the refugees? Who was behind the repatriation efforts? Were these repatriations initiated by the Armenian authorities, or were they

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<sup>713</sup> Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 142.

<sup>714</sup> More on the press campaign and discourse on AGBU vs. HOK confrontation, see AGBU archives, file “Lragrakan ktronner, 1927-1930” [Press Items].

<sup>715</sup> For example, ARF fundraised twice after the flooding in Yerevan 1925 and earthquake of Leninakan in 1926 but Soviet authorities refused to take their donations, see in Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 26.

<sup>716</sup> Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 29.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>718</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>719</sup> Martuni (Myasnikyan) *Kusaktsutyunnere Gaghutahayutyanyan Mej.*

<sup>720</sup> Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 29, 46.

<sup>721</sup> Myasnikyan, *Kusaktsutyunnere Gaghutahayutyanyan Mej.*, 54-55.

directly coordinated by Moscow? What did Soviet authorities aim to achieve by organizing the repatriations?

In her work on the communist movements in the Middle East, historian Ter-Minassian contends that, until the mid-1930s, there was no systematic Soviet policy towards the Middle Eastern minorities and that many initiatives were a combination of local initiatives, actions by the Soviet member states, and efforts by Moscow.<sup>722</sup> Close examination of the repatriation campaigns of the Armenian refugees and the Soviet policies in Syria and Lebanon shows the opposite. In fact, Moscow's involvement was evident from the start. It is enough to mention that dealing with the refugees and repatriation involved extensive foreign relations activities and that Soviet member states were not allowed to conduct these independently. Moreover, there is ample evidence that Soviet embassies and diplomats were actively involved in preparing lists of the persons who qualified for repatriation, coordinating with the local authorities, and arranging transportation.<sup>723</sup> Soviet historian Meliksetyan mentions another piece of evidence; regular consultations held in Moscow where detailed budgets were prepared.<sup>724</sup> The decision to repatriate only those abroad and not those who lived in other Soviet countries, is another hint. I argue that there were at least two other important reasons, one economic and one political, behind Moscow's interest that coincidentally overlapped with the interests of the Armenians.

In terms of economic interests, Armenian national archives reveal that Soviet authorities in Moscow became interested in the Armenian refugees in relation to the production of cotton. Transcaucasia, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuban, and the central Volga were identified as excellent sites for cotton cultivation.<sup>725</sup> Cotton had become an issue after production had fallen in the USA, resulting in higher prices. The USSR, with its 150 million inhabitants, needed 500 million tons of cotton yearly, which meant paying 1 billion dollars to the USA or Great Britain to obtain it. Hence, Soviet authorities had decided to produce their own.<sup>726</sup> Notably, in Lausanne, Chicherin had offered to host up to 250,000 Armenian refugees to be settled in the above-mentioned regions, which were already earmarked for cotton production. Moreover, practical steps were taken almost immediately, cotton was planted, two major irrigation projects were started in Armenia at Shirak and Sardarabat, and elsewhere, and a major textile factory

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<sup>722</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern: l'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris, les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997).

<sup>723</sup> HHA, 113, list 3, file 377, 3 and file 486, 19.

<sup>724</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 101.

<sup>725</sup> HAA, fond 430, list 1, file 361, 4-8, Karakhan, "The Proposition of the Russian Government to Settle Armenian refugees," April 13, 1923.

<sup>726</sup> HAA, fond 430, list 1, file 343, 17-44, Karakhan "Cotton in Armenia," May 26, 1924.

was established in Leninikan (now Gyumri).<sup>727</sup> The construction of Shirak channel began in 1922 and was completed by 1925. However, the construction of Sardarabat required much greater financial means, which the Soviet authorities had hoped to find elsewhere; for example, by tying it in with the refugee settlement and repatriation and bringing in foreign investments, especially as the LoN seemed interested in the scheme.<sup>728</sup> We shall see later how Sardarabat would also be financed by Moscow after the LoN refused to provide support.<sup>729</sup>

In this regard, it is interesting to note the trip of Pastor Montgomery (the director of Armenia-America Society and member of the Phil-Armenian League) to Moscow on behalf of NER to study the settlement possibilities. Montgomery had consultations with Chicherin, his deputy Karahan, and Weinstein (head of the Allied and American department of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs), and Ter-Gabrielyan (Armenian representative in Moscow).<sup>730</sup> It turned out that Montgomery's project also had significant economic importance for the West. In addition to working on the refugee settlement, he was in Moscow to negotiate a deal on behalf of KRUPP, a German company that, during the War, had produced military hardware and now sought ways to transform its factories to produce agricultural machinery. To this end, Russia, which had empty land and needed to modernize, had been identified as the best market.<sup>731</sup> The precise link between Montgomery and KRUPP remains unclear. His trip to Russia is mostly understood in relation to the settlement of the Armenian refugees.

Arguably, while the Western "humanitarian" organizations looked for ways to use the refugees for their own interests, so did Moscow and Yerevan. Neither the irrigation nor the economic development of Armenia was done for the sake of the Armenians but to serve wider Soviet interests. Armenian authorities, in their turn, used Moscow's favorable policies to achieve their own goals.

Meanwhile, in Syria, another power, France, had similar motives (bringing foreign investments, strategically capitalizing on LoN cooperation, developing northern Syria by turning it into a major cotton-producing center to make the mandate profitable, and last but not

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<sup>727</sup> Ibid, and HAA, fond 430, list 1, file 361, 4-8, Karakhan, "The Proposition of the Russian Government."

<sup>728</sup> By 1926 Soviet agricultural policies gave excellent results too; 90% of the pre-war land was being again cultivated and the production rose to 71.5 % of the pre-war level, Matossian, *The Impact of Soviet Policies*, 57.

<sup>729</sup> Its construction began in 1925 and was completed by 1932.

<sup>730</sup> During these consultations, it was suggested to settle 25,000 Armenian refugees on the coast of the Black Sea, near Sokhumi, 10,000 in the Kuban, and up to 200,000 in the Volga district. To this suggestion, Montgomery had insisted on an order of preference for the settlement, placing Soviet Armenia in the first place, followed by Transcaucasia, Black Sea, Kuban, and the Volga. See in N:6 the letter of John Gorvin to Nansen about the settlement of 200,000 Armenian refugees, Moscow, March 31, 1923, *A devotee of the Armenian issue – Fridtjof Nansen*, Collection of Documents (1920-1930) (The National Archives of Armenia, Yerevan, 2005), 19-20.

<sup>731</sup> HHA, Fond 430, list 1, file 360, 1-3, Montgomery's project, "Refugees to Northern Caucasus," April 13, 1923.

least, enhancing its humanitarian prestige) when embarking on the refugee settlement in Syria. In the later chapters, we shall see the entangled history of the two settlement schemes.

As for the political interests, Moscow aimed to use the refugees as a bargaining chip to establish diplomatic contacts with the outside world, thus overcoming its isolation (first), and to get financial aid in the form of loans or direct investments to save its economy (second). By this time, Soviet authorities had discovered the direct link between refugee settlement and the channeling of foreign financial aid and investments that helped, in its turn, to reconstruct and develop the country. A letter from Lenin to the Armenian authorities is telling. Lenin urged them not to copy the early experiments in Soviet Russia but to be flexible by applying the lessons learned. He wrote,

Russia continues to be cut off from the Western world, *while the Caucasus could achieve an understanding and establish trade relations with the capitalist West much quicker and smoother*. You need to be more cautious and softer towards the small bourgeoisie, intellectuals, and especially the rural population. You need to start an exchange of goods and monopolies (petrol, coal, copper, etc.) quickly and on a bigger scale with the capitalist West... You need to establish trade relations with Italy and the USA, as well as other countries. We must do it in order to improve the situation of the peasants... by immediately starting electrification and large irrigation large works. Irrigation has the absolute priority as it will transform the country, will revive it, bury the past, and thus strengthen communism.<sup>732</sup>

Was it a coincidence that Lenin's letter was published in the British *Manchester Guardian* in July 1921?<sup>733</sup> Moscow was looking for ways out of its isolation. The Caucasus seemed to be the much-needed bridge, and the Armenian refugees the required means. Several foreign organizations had already provided support to the thousands of destitute refugees. At the same time, there were thousands more refugees in the territories controlled by the European powers. By claiming these refugees, Soviet authorities obtained the right to appoint their representatives, enter negotiations, and establish contacts and cooperation. This can explain the rapid transformation of the HOK from a relief agency to a propaganda tool for Moscow.

It must be said that Soviet hopes were fulfilled. Refugee repatriation campaigns were an efficient means to establish cooperation with the British, in particular. After the British Labor Party came to power in 1924, official recognition of the USSR occurred in the same year. This paved the way for further acceptance as Italy and France followed suit soon after.<sup>734</sup> Lengthy

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<sup>732</sup> Cited in Simon Vratsian, *Hayastane Bolshevikyan*, 167-170; also Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 140. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>733</sup> Cited in Jo Laycock, "Saving the Remnant or Building Socialism? Transnational Humanitarian Relief in Early Soviet Armenia," *Moving the Social*, 57 (2017), 77-96, 86.

<sup>734</sup> US President Franklin Roosevelt recognized the USSR on November 16, 1933.

negotiations for a loan were also initiated, first with Great Britain and then with France. Ironically, during the British electoral campaign of 1924, the Armenian refugees had featured as valuable assets to claim international funds, as revealed by Chicherin in his speech in Yerevan. We cite his entire speech due to its importance.

In London (Conference 1921), our government declared its readiness to host up to 250,000 refugees, given that their living and transportation costs were paid. In Lausanne, Pastor Montgomery had a project to offer 30 million dollars to establish an *Armenian home in Northern Syria*. As neither France nor Turkey were interested, he turned to us, visited Moscow and Caucasus only to announce afterwards that he was unable to collect the necessary funds. They were ready to give 30 million to build a political outpost in Turkey or maybe even a British-American one against France, but did not agree to allocate the same funds for the settlement of the refugees on the Soviet territories. Most recently during the electoral campaign in London, Baldwin suggested using the 5 million Turkish lira kept in the German banks considered as an Ottoman war debt for the settlement of the refugees, as the money had belonged to the Armenians. Unfortunately, this declaration, too, was forgotten once the elections were over. We, however, did not forget and our ambassador Rakovski shall remind the British... Recently, we have learned that Albert Thomas, the general secretary of the International Labor Office works on the issue. It is not clear to us what has this organization to do with the settlement of the Armenian refugees, nor why is he (Thomas) particularly interested in the Sardarapat plain. We shall study all the possibilities to settle the refugees. The Soviet Union shall do all the possible to achieve this goal. In case it fails, it will not be our fault but the result of the plots.<sup>735</sup>

In the spring of 1925, the Soviet authorities formed yet another refugee body in Tbilisi to deal efficiently and effectively with the refugee issues. The news was announced by Levan Gogoberitsin, the deputy prime minister of Georgia, during a visit to Paris. He had stressed that the Soviet authorities had always shown a particular interest in the issue of the Armenian refugees. It was enough to remember the announcements of Chicherin in Lausanne. However, neither the Armenian nor foreign organizations had responded to the Soviet overtures. Therefore, the Soviet authorities decided to solve the refugee issue on their own, forming a special committee to bring a fresh perspective to the issue.<sup>736</sup>

It is noteworthy that, previously, the plans for an “Armenian home” for the Ottoman Armenians did not seem to bother the Soviet authorities. One of the leading figures of Soviet Armenia, Bekzadyan, declared in 1922 that Soviet Armenian authorities were not against the idea of an “Armenian home” since “we are of the opinion that we do not need to interfere in

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<sup>735</sup> “Chicherin-I Tjare” [Chicherin’s Speech at the Yerevan City Council], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 3, 1925, 1.

<sup>736</sup> *Banvor* (Paris) cited in “Nor Gaghtayin Handznakhmbi Kazmutyune” [The Formation of The New Refugee Body] *Suriakan Mamul*, April 10, 1925, 4.

the cause of the Ottoman Armenians. It is preferable that the latter themselves solve their issue.”<sup>737</sup> However, by 1925, it was obvious that this was no longer the case.

In the famous petition, Bekzadyan thought differently.<sup>738</sup> Not only did the petition ask for the refugee problem to be shifted from a narrow national concern to a larger issue, but it also aimed to prevent the ARF, Nansen, the LoN, and the other Phil-Armenia organizations from claiming their authority over the refugees. Therefore, the refugee question must become an international matter showing that the Armenian refugees were the victims of imperialist policies and their issues could only be solved by the Soviets and international revolutionary means. From Chicherin’s speech, it was also obvious that the Soviet authorities were nervous and suspicious about the increased interest of the ILO (and others) in the Armenian refugees.

It becomes clear that, at least on the refugee settlement and repatriation issues, Moscow’s and Yerevan’s interests overlapped, a fortunate coincidence for the Armenians. This may explain why the Armenian authorities were encouraged by Moscow to initiate rushed repatriations when the basic needs of the thousands of destitute refugees already in the country were not met, and the economy was still in ruins.<sup>739</sup>

A close examination of Soviet repatriation policies toward Armenian refugees shows that it was highly self-serving; economic development, additional funds, and more labor without any cost to the state, but also claiming legitimacy, obtaining a good reputation as a humanitarian and refugee-hosting state, as well as spreading communist propaganda – all under the banner of caring for the refugees.

In the post-Lausanne years, competition over the refugees took another form, especially between the Soviet authorities, HHA, and DNA. Notably, on November 30, 1924, DNA changed its name and reemerged as the “Armenian Central Refugee Committee,” once again closely related to the AGBU. Refugees, as before, provided its *raison d’être*. As for the HHA, it was renamed the “Committee of the Armenian Cause,” headed by Simon Vratsian. Thus, Soviet Armenia had two powerful, well-established, and influential “enemies” to fight in the Armenian colonies abroad. Soviet authorities played a double game, especially with the AGBU; they eagerly took their financial support without refraining from criticizing and discrediting them. Their main criticism was that AGBU did not spend enough money. While Soviet Armenia

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<sup>737</sup> *Apaga*, N: 23, May 20, 1922, cited in Dallakyan, *Hay Spyurki*, 10.

<sup>738</sup> HAA, Fond 1, list 5, file 47a, 1-27, Letter of Bekzadyan, Solovyan, Karabekyan and Mikayelyan to the communist central party, Berlin, November 25, 1925.

<sup>739</sup> In 1922 the cultivated area was only 29% of what it had been in 1914. Furthermore, the harvest of 1922 provided only 60% of the grain needed to feed the population. The presence of Near East Relief had been vital in fighting against the starvation, in Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, *The Impact of Soviet Policies*, 53.



“cared for the refugees and the orphans, other (Armenian) organizations and political parties were ignorant.”<sup>740</sup> The competition with the ARF, which had sought to establish a “diasporic central administration” to govern the Ottoman Armenian refugees, was especially fierce.

On both sides, various alliances were made to claim the refugees. For the DNA, it was the alliance with the Catholicos of Cilicia, another national body that competed with Edjmiatsin in Soviet Armenia and would lack legitimacy and *raison d’être* without the refugees. The close cooperation between them and the French authorities mandated them to defend the interests of the Cilician Armenians in Syria and Lebanon. This explains the intensive exchange between the delegation and Sahak II documented in the archives.<sup>741</sup> In the same vein, the ARF made an alliance with the pro-French forces in Syria and Lebanon and the French authorities. They not only attempted to control all the administration but also appointed their members as deputies in the Syrian and Lebanese parliaments. Later, they also succeeded in bringing the Cilician Catholicos under their control.<sup>742</sup> As for the Soviets, they used all the revolts and uprisings in the Arabic world to mobilize apolitical refugees through the trade unions and involve them in organizing strikes and demonstrations, as we shall see in the later chapters. Thus, even those refugees uninterested in politics and only concerned with their daily bread were gradually politicized, often fighting against their compatriots who sided with the opposite bloc.

Obviously, this competition did little to help the refugees and even less to improve their living conditions. Instead, they were caught up in the fierce competition between the various agencies, which regarded them merely as numbers, not human beings needing assistance. All too often, genuine efforts by the Phil-Armenian organizations were doomed to failure, falling victim to this competition. One of the best examples of this was the fate of the congress organized by the pro-Armenian League headed by Edward Navil and Craft Bonar in Geneva on September 2–8, 1923, right after the Lausanne conference. This aimed to gather all major pro-Armenian organizations to discuss the fate of the Armenian refugees and their settlement possibilities, given the omissions in the Treaty. The agenda also included the transfer of 50,000 refugees to Soviet Armenia. Soviet authorities, always suspicious that ARF leaders were behind a “pan-Armenian” congress, did everything possible to boycott the gathering. They were especially offended that the fate of the Armenian refugees was discussed in the absence of the

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<sup>740</sup> Essayi Karikian, *Kentronadzig ev Kentornaxuys* [Centrifuge and Centrifugal] (Paris, 1925), 6.

<sup>741</sup> In fact, like the twin Armenian delegations, there were also two catholicosate - one in Edjmiatsin, (Soviet Armenia), and one in Antelias (Lebanon).

<sup>742</sup> More on the contested elections in 1956, see in Tsolin Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora: Making Lebanon Their Own* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

Soviet representatives.<sup>743</sup> The organizers were equally blamed by the DNA for being under the ARF's influence.<sup>744</sup> At the close of the congress, the organizers circulated an Open Letter, which carried the telling heading "Aux invitées de la conference philarménienne et Arménienne et à tous les Arméniens."<sup>745</sup> The letter lamented that the intentions of the pro-Armenian League had been intentionally misrepresented and misused as a result of the "narrow spirit of political parties and their attempts to divide Armenians and their lack of confidence towards each other." The League had been unfairly blamed for being under the influence of a single party (ARF) while, in fact, it had invited both Armenian delegations and many others since none of the delegations were actually representative. No Soviet representatives were invited because of the lack of Soviet-Swiss diplomatic relations.<sup>746</sup>

For their part, Soviet Armenian authorities, suspicious about the timing of such a conference that had coincided with disturbances in Georgia against Soviet rule, declared, "We are perfectly aware that capitalist countries (Great Britain and France) have used us (Armenians) for 40 years to advance their interests in Turkey and the Middle East. *Now we declare that the refugee issue is central for our government and we shall do everything possible to solve it.*"<sup>747</sup>

Soviet authorities also claimed that only "progressive forces" could speak on behalf of the refugees, who were also the only ones doing real practical work by repatriating and offering other solutions to the refugee issue.<sup>748</sup> Obviously, neither of the two delegations, nor their other agencies, nor the pro-Armenian League was among them. It was only Soviet Armenia and its agencies. This was just the beginning of a great game. In the next chapters, we shall see how this competition over the refugees took much sharper forms, how two competing projects emerged, and how the destruction of one became the victory of the other.

## Conclusions

Part I showed that the conventional assumptions of most Western historiography depicting French-Armenian relations cordial, while Armenian-Syrian relations hostile did not correspond to reality.

The interpretation of the Aleppo incident is important because it has played a critical role in presenting Syrian-Armenian and Armenian-French relations in ways still dominant in

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<sup>743</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 311.

<sup>744</sup> Papazian, *Im Husheres*, 3:172.

<sup>745</sup> Ibid, 3:170. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>746</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>747</sup> Askanaz Mravian, "Gaghtakanneri Pokhadrutyan Hartce" [The Issue of the Transfer of the Refugees], *Suriakan Mamul*, November 23, 1924, 2. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>748</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 312.

mainstream literature today. It is usually presented as a hostile Muslim Syrian attitude towards the incoming Christian Armenian refugees, who were allied with the French colonial power. This perceived alliance (real or imaginary) between the Armenian refugees and the French was an easy explanation for any violent incidents. Each time, the Armenian refugees were punished for having allied with the colonial power and enjoyed all kinds of privileges at the expense of the locals. Therefore, the representation of both incidents (Beirut and Aleppo) in the press by the French authorities is important for it would lay a pattern that would be used systematically throughout the entire mandate period in relation to other contentious events, including the citizenship offer, the Syrian Revolt, and the supposed Armenian “national home.”

As demonstrated, at times, the French authorities and their subsidized press organs skillfully exploited certain incidents, such as those in Beirut and Aleppo, presenting them as Christian-Muslim clashes between the Armenians and the Syrians. This was done to serve French political purposes. These included discrediting Faysal and his Arab government as well as showing that the Syrians were unready for self-rule and that the French mandate was necessary to prevent sectarian clashes and massacres.

The French authorities purposely and systematically initiated or directly encouraged some of the anti-Armenian polemics in the Syrian papers. Their aim was to prevent Armenian-Syrian rapprochement and put pressure on both sides. Furthermore, since the Armenian refugees were suspected of having doubtful loyalties and the British and the American authorities were interested in this refugee population, the French aimed to keep the Armenian refugees vulnerable and always in need of protection. Moreover, since Syria and Lebanon were under the French mandate, the Armenians needed to understand that such protection could be extended to them only by the French. Thus, the French aimed to create a degree of dependency.

Part I also showed that the conventional assumptions of most Western historiography that French-Armenian relations were cordial, and the cooperation between them “natural” did not correspond to reality. Such relations were initially constrained because of competing claims over Cilicia, the formation and dissolution of the Légion, and later the French refusal to host the Armenian refugees fleeing from Cilicia. Eventually, the French authorities reluctantly accepted the refugees, and then only after the Armenian leaders had secured the agreement of the Lebanese Maronite elite. After hosting them, the French authorities quickly made clear that Armenians could not hope for the wide-scale humanitarian and settlement support they had previously enjoyed in Cilicia. French financial support, which was limited in scale (soup kitchens, medical check-ups, and some military tents), lasted for only three months. Instead, French mandatory authorities gradually changed their attitude toward the Armenian refugees

after several incidents staged by Turkish agents. These incidents aimed to discredit the refugees in the eyes of the Syrians by portraying Armenians as dangerous and the only ones who sustained the unwanted French rule. At the same time, it aimed to discredit the French mandate that encouraged the inter-ethnic clashes.

Other than this, French mandatory authorities quickly realized the benefits offered by the presence of a large number of refugees. Soon they embarked on large-scale public works, which aimed to improve the look of the main urban centers, thus also serving the purposes of the mandate – modernization and civilization. Later, ad-hoc refugee settlements in the countryside were also facilitated by the French authorities in their attempts to increase the number of cultivators to develop the Syrian Jazira to render the mandate profitable but also gain the sympathy of the locals by improving their living conditions. The first experiments were a success and went hand-in-hand with the other French policies; establishing security, improving French bases in Northern Syria, gaining more human resources in agricultural colonies, developing northern Syria, and achieving the sedentarization of the tribes.

Part I also demonstrated the changed international order in which the newly created LoN was to play a significant role and how it began to be involved with the settlement of the Armenian refugees. Finally, it showed the diversity of the organizations and states that claimed authority over the refugees, each pursuing their own political agenda and economic interest. All these aspects would continue throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as we shall discover in the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

## Part II: The politics of belonging, identity, and citizenship in French mandatory Syria

Syrian citizenship was granted to the Armenian refugees by two French High Commissioners – General Weygand in August 1924 and General Sarrail in January 1925 – on the basis of two different articles of the Lausanne Treaty. Weygand declared it on the basis of Article 8 on August 30, 1924, while Sarrail announced the same on January 19, 1925, on the basis of Article 13.

Today, the granting of citizenship to the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon is mostly studied one-sidedly as yet another tool exercised by the French authorities to use the Armenian refugees to extend their political influence in Syria and Lebanon. Historian Watenpaugh has argued that “With this new status, Armenian refugees were expected to advance the French political agenda by altering the demographic picture of Syria and strengthening the French colonial rule... by advancing its political agenda during the elections.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, in his view, citizenship, first of all, meant creating a new electoral constituency that would behave predictably, upon orders received. Other works engaging with the Armenian refugee experience in Syria in one way or another have largely accepted Watenpaugh’s assertion, automatically and uncritically claiming a greater Armenian role in the vote outcome, especially in Aleppo. Seda Altuğ, for one, has argued that the French mandatory authorities manipulated the population figures by allocating two Armenian representatives in the elections of 1926. Because these elections were boycotted by the town’s leading nationalists, Altuğ attributed a greater role to Armenian participation, based on the articles in the Damascene nationalist press.<sup>2</sup> She further claimed that, in Aleppo, where the biggest immigrant population lived, the social and economic discomfort was translated into communal fights thanks to the French “politics of difference.”<sup>3</sup> She maintained that by offering Syrian citizenship to the Armenian refugees, the mandatory authorities institutionalized the “Armenian sect as one of the nine sects in French-Syria.”<sup>4</sup> To support her argument, Altuğ cited Watenpaugh’s article on “survivor’s bargain,” in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*, (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015), 176; Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East, Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 211-308.

<sup>2</sup> Seda Altuğ, “Making of Refugee-ness and Armenians in French Syria (1915–1939): Religion, Land, History,” in *Armenians in Syria*, ed. Antranik Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018), 169; Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land, and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939),” (Unpublished diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 216.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Seda Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira,” 218.

latter had justified the Armenian cooperation with the French colonial rule out of the necessity to survive.<sup>5</sup>

In Altuğ's works, neither the "acts of citizenship,"<sup>6</sup> nor the elections and the Armenian participation in it, nor the political scene in Aleppo, where she claimed a significant Armenian vote impact, nor the attitudes of the Armenians toward the local citizenship and the voting opportunity are examined. The most recent research on Aleppo during the interwar period, and Joel Veldkamp's dissertation, in particular, has already addressed some of these shortcomings by closely studying the elections, electoral laws, and electoral campaigns as well as the participation of all the communities, including the Armenians. Veldkamp has revealed that the French success of having elected pro-mandate candidates was largely confined to the countryside and did not occur in the towns.<sup>7</sup> Veldkamp's entire dissertation is devoted to showing that Aleppo did not become part of Syria overnight and that the tensions between Aleppo and Damascus continued throughout the interwar years.<sup>8</sup> Many articles in the Damascene nationalist press, especially during the elections, expressed fear of autonomist aspirations in Aleppo, usually ascribed to the refugees.<sup>9</sup> Veldkamp has also shown that neither were the Armenians valuable assets for the French in Syria, nor they were regarded as such by the French, nor were the French ready to safeguard Armenian interests if they conflicted with their relations with Kemalist Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

More nuanced analyses are necessary to understand the citizenship and belonging in French mandatory Syria beyond the linear sectarian perspective. In this chapter, we adopt the multi-layered approach proposed by William Hanley and Lauren Banko.<sup>11</sup> Instead of assuming the Armenian refugees to be tools readily available to the French to manipulate the demography of Syria, and by doing so advance their own political goals, we would like to introduce some other layers of the story, which ultimately nuance the above-mentioned claims.

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<sup>5</sup> K. Watenpaugh, "Towards a New Category of Colonial Theory: Colonial Cooperation and the Survivors' Bargain – the Case of the Post-Genocide Armenian Community of Syria under French Mandate" in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Peter Sluglett et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 597-622, 602.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the term "Acts of citizenship" from Isin, see in *Acts of Citizenship*, ed., E.F. Isin and G.M. Nielsen, (London, New York: Zed Books, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Joel Veldkamp, "The Politics of Aleppo's Christians and the Formation of the Syrian Nation-State, 1920-1936" (Unpublished diss., Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2021), see his chapter on "Aleppo's Armenians and the French Mandate," 110-120; see also Peter Shambrook, *French Imperialism in Syria, 1927-1936* (UK, Ithaca Press, 1998), 17-19.

<sup>8</sup> Veldkamp, "The Politics, see Chapter 4, "Autonomy," 142.

<sup>9</sup> More on the autonomist movement in Aleppo, see *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> Veldkamp, "The Politics," 110.

<sup>11</sup> William Hanley, "When did Egyptians Stop Being Ottomans? An Imperial Citizenship Case Study," in *Multilevel Citizenship*, ed., Willem Mass (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 108; Lauren Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918-1947* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 7.

French long-term interests, indeed, dictated extending local citizenship to the Armenian refugees and encouraging them to settle permanently. As explained in Part I of this dissertation, the French authorities needed numerous cheap working hands to achieve major public works in the cities, as well as labor to develop the agricultural potential of Jazira. Furthermore, the first settlement experiments were already a reality, and more concrete and ambitious settlement plans were gradually taking shape. In parallel, the Syrian state was also consolidating gradually as the French mandatory opted for unity rather than further fragmentation and division.

This notwithstanding, when the French authorities extended citizenship to the Armenians, they did so in close collaboration with the Maronite elites in Beirut. Furthermore, there is another previously undisclosed side to it. The idea of extending citizenship to the Armenian refugees was not exclusively French. In fact, such a suggestion had already been made to the French High Commissioner by a high-ranking Alepine delegation, who suggested extending “Syrian citizenship to the large Armenian refugee community of Aleppo and thereby, keeping them away from a foreign influence.” Of course, it did not mean that all the Syrians agreed and shared the opinions behind the Alepine delegation’s suggestion. The ensuing nationalist discourse in Damascus against citizenship showed that the Damascene nationalists did not support such a demand. Neither did it mean that the French authorities granted the citizenship shortly afterward just to please the Alepine delegation.

The simple fact that such a suggestion had come from the Aleppo notables is enough to nuance the claims that “all the Syrians were hostile toward the Armenian refugees and that the latter were mostly tools in the French hands to achieve their colonial goals.” The second little-known aspect of this story is the strong Armenian opposition to the citizenship opportunity.

What foreign influence did the Alepine delegation refer to? Why and how was this suggestion made? What was the reaction of the French High Commissioner and the Armenians themselves? Part II will provide answers to these questions, among many others.

## **Chapter I: Syrians imagine the “nation”**

This chapter illustrates the attitude of the Alepines toward the refugees, the circumstances under which Syrian (and Lebanese) citizenship and voting rights were granted to the Armenian refugees, and how this move was perceived by the Syrian hosts.

## Alepiners in search of solutions to face the refugee issue

Throughout 1922 and 1923, years before the refugees became citizens, the refugee issue had become a daily topic of conversation in Aleppo and occupied a central place in the local Arabic press. An analysis of these articles shows that the overall Syrian attitude was rather ambivalent. *Al-Suriya al-Shemaliya*, for example, complained that the largest street of Aleppo, Khantagi, was primarily populated by Armenians, whose numbers grew daily. Aleppo was certainly not “New York” and had limited capacities and opportunities; thus, the issue required an immediate solution. It advised the government to stop the arrival of new refugees and to resettle the refugees in the camps elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Another article, this time by *al-Taqaddum*, advised the Alepiners to appreciate all the benefits brought about by the refugees.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, two diametrically different articles were printed in the local Syrian press about the Armenian refugees and reproduced side by side by the local Armenian press. While one can say that the first article contained certain anti-Armenian overtones, it did not preach hostility. One thing was clear, Alepiners were looking for solutions to the refugee issue and discussing the problem openly in the media. For example, *Suriakan Mamul* reported that local notables had advised the French authorities to settle Armenian refugees on the lands that formerly belonged to the Sultan. These lands needed working hands and would be profitable for everyone. Refugees were to be settled and provided with employment, while Syrians would benefit from the taxes they paid. The same source mentioned that French officials had also been interested in this idea.<sup>14</sup>

Notably, it was not only the Syrian press who sought solutions to the refugee issue but, most importantly, the local authorities. The discussions of the Aleppo Representative Council and its decision to allocate 3,000 Turkish lira to the refugees at the suggestion of none other than Subhi Barakat, who headed the Council, were actively debated in the press. The announcements of Barakat were duly quoted and commented on. He had announced that although Aleppo could not possibly take in an unlimited number of refugees, Alepiners could benefit from the refugee presence. The decision to help the refugees financially had angered *An-Nahda*, which had found it unjust that the refugees were entitled to support but not the locals. Although *An-Nahda*'s article was critical, it did not contain anti-refugee rhetoric; on the contrary, an article said,

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<sup>12</sup> “The Poor Aleppo and the Refugees” in *Suriya Shemaliya*, cited in “Suria al-shemaliye-i hodvatse” [The Article of Suria al-Shemalia], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 27, 1922, 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> “Armenian people” *Taqaddum*, August 22, 1922, cited in “Suriakan Lurer” [Syrian News], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 24, 1922, 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Havitnakan Zohere,” [The Eternal Victims], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 10, 1922, 1.



We have nothing against the idea of helping the refugees... but we also need to support our people... who are in the same condition as the refugees. We cannot ask our people to leave for elsewhere. Besides, not all 20,000 refugees need support; many of them have working skills. Therefore, it would be better if they left for bigger countries with factories... Here in Syria, we need only cultivators... If the refugees stay here, all of us shall suffer... The mere sight of the poor refugees, makes our hearts suffer; if our country were large enough, we would have wished them to stay with us...<sup>15</sup>

The message conveyed by *Al-Suriya al-Shimaliya* was identical. Previously it had suggested dispersing the refugees, now it demanded that they should be sent away from Syria, to Europe and USA. “Are these not the countries that have sacrificed thousands for the sake of humanity? Is it not these countries who have provided support to the Armenian and the Greek refugees, which they undoubtedly deserve? But we demand such kindness and support toward us, too.”<sup>16</sup>

Other papers, including *Al-Barid al-Suriy*, suggested mutually profitable solutions. One such opportunity was agriculture, which was identified as the “treasure” of Syria and desperately needed more working hands. The major public works that were underway were another. Refugees offered abundant labor, and many were qualified in the professions.<sup>17</sup> *Al-Taqaddum*, for its part, published a series of articles in which the benefits brought about by the refugees were emphasized. In one of these articles, it advised the local government, French authorities, and charity organizations to buy tools and equipment for the refugees instead of distributing clothes and bread.<sup>18</sup>

*Suriakan Mamul*, the local Alepine paper that was the organ of the Henschak party, first reproduced all the articles that had appeared in the local Arabic press, then devoted a series of articles to analyzing them.<sup>19</sup> According to *Suriakan Mamul*, most of the articles were rather sympathetic; however, the Syrians had two main concerns; one political and one economic. The political concern stemmed from the fear that Armenians might settle in Syria permanently and tighten their control over trade and handicrafts, thus becoming the ruling class over time. However, the economic concerns were much more important.<sup>20</sup> The editors of *Suriakan Mamul*

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<sup>15</sup> “Aleppo and the Refugees, Support us in the Same Way as You support the Refugees” *An-Nahda*, December 23, 1922, cited in “Anontc Pes Mez el Gtacek,” *Suriakan Mamul*, December 28, 1922, 1; Hrand “Sharjum Hay Gaghtakannerun Dem” [A Movement Against the Armenian Refugees] *Arey*, February 6, 1924, 1.

<sup>16</sup> “Aleppo and the Refugees,” *Al-Suriya al-Shimaliya*, cited in “Gaghtakanneru Hartce,” [The Refugee Issue] *Suriakan Mamul*, December 21, 1922, 2.

<sup>17</sup> M.A. “Gharib” [Stranger], *Al-Barid al-Suriy*, Decemebr 23, 1922, cited in *Suriakan Mamul*, December 28, 1922, 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> “Aleppo and the Refugees” *Al-Taqnaddum*, December 22, 27, 28, 1922, cited in “Halep ev Gaghtakanner,” [Aleppo and The Refugees], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 31, 1922, 1.

<sup>19</sup> “Gaghtakanutyen Dere Surio Mej” [The Role of the Refugees in Syria], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 11, 18, 21, 1923, 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> “Gaghtakanutyen Dere Surio Mej,” *Suriakan Mamul*, January 11, 1923, 1-2.

embarked on a mission to assure their Syrian counterparts that not a single Armenian national body sought to establish *a new homeland* in Syria... and that the Armenian presence was not to last a long time. Special attention was devoted to the main complaints, which revolved around the issue of high rents, competition, and the spread of diseases.

*Suriakan Mamul* argued that, in all cases, the benefits brought about by the refugees greatly outnumbered the disadvantages. It was true that rents had skyrocketed, but who had suffered from this the most? The Syrians owned the houses, while the refugees who rented them paid the inflated prices. In the same vein, food prices had risen, but once again, it was the Syrians who sold and the refugees who consumed. In all cases, refugees paid higher prices, while the Syrians and the local economy, in general, profited.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the money earned by the refugees was being spent in Syria. In addition, while many refugees did not manage to find employment, they all had to pay for their living costs. The other Syrian argument was that Armenian artisans created competition, so the prices dropped, and the Syrian artisans earned less. However, this situation would benefit thousands of Syrian consumers. In addition, the price drop was circular, and if Syrian artisans suffered in one respect, they surely gained elsewhere; for example, by buying cheaper materials and collecting inflated rents. The last point, the widespread claim that refugees spread diseases, was also addressed. On this topic, the paper declared that the Armenians were famous for their cleanliness and had been praised by everyone in this regard. After referring one by one to all the main concerns raised by the Syrians, the paper hoped that the counter-arguments provided would be printed in Arabic in the Syrian press.<sup>22</sup>

It is noteworthy that when *Al-Haghighat* of Beirut continued to claim that the refugees spread diseases, it was the central health office of Beirut municipality that immediately denied the claim by announcing that, since the refugees' arrival, no infectious diseases had been recorded in the camps.<sup>23</sup>

The discussions about rent and the "lazy" refugees who refused to work for modest payments would not disappear from the press for a long time. For example, in the spring of 1923, *Al-Suriya al-Shimaliya* resumed its angry tone against the refugees. This time they were accused of refusing to help with the harvest, working against a daily payment of 20–25 *ghurush*. *Suriakan Mamul* reproduced the article and claimed that this paper and its editor, Khavage Sharafi, had mounted a systematic anti-Armenian campaign and that his article was not justified

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<sup>21</sup> "Gaghtakanutyun Dere Surio Mej," *Suriakan Mamul*, January 18, 1923, 1.

<sup>22</sup> "Gaghtakanutyun Dere Surio Mej," *Suriakan Mamul*, January 21, 1923, 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> "Irakanutyune" [The Reality], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 11, 1923, 2.

because he knew very well that hundreds had accepted these jobs with even lower daily wages (15–18 *ghurush*).<sup>24</sup>

The rent issue in Aleppo and Beirut was also persistently discussed in the press but not always in relation to the refugees. Interestingly the efforts by the local authorities to regulate the rents were not appreciated by the locals.<sup>25</sup> In Aleppo, as elsewhere, the landlords were categorically against such interference.<sup>26</sup> In 1922, special commissions were set up to regulate the rent by putting pressure on the landlords.<sup>27</sup> The result was a law that was finally published in August 1923, clearly stating that rents were to be restored to pre-War levels.<sup>28</sup>

Armenian refugee leaders, for their part, tried to gain the sympathy of the locals. For example, in February 1922, as the anniversary of the Aleppo massacres approached, Sahak II suggested to Nubar that he should ask for the liberation of those still in prison as a kind gesture from the Armenians. He argued that the news would receive wide coverage in the local press, creating a favorable environment for the Armenians.<sup>29</sup> In fact, this was one of the first public acts the Armenian leaders undertook. The result was as positive as they had hoped. The move received wide coverage and was greatly appreciated by the Syrians, as we learn from the response of Noratunkian to Sahak II.<sup>30</sup> It was hoped that anti-refugee calls in Beirut and Damascus could be stopped without any serious consequences. Noratunkian explained that “our people have every interest in living in peace and harmony with the locals, to be patient and adaptive to the current circumstances... since we are so close to the final solution that, without doubt, shall be just.”<sup>31</sup>

On February 16, 1922, *Suriakan Mamul* published an editorial on how fortunate Armenians were “to enjoy the hospitality of both the Syrians and the French in Aleppo, in the true sense of the word, whereby they had been obliged to ask for shelter”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Al-Suriya al-Shemayliya*, May 10, 1923, cited in Tigran, “Gaghtakannere ev Suriya al-Shemaliye” [Refugees and Suriya al-Shemaliye], *Suriakan Mamul*, May 17, 1923, 1.

<sup>25</sup> The rents had skyrocketed since the end of WWI. If a small room costed 3 mejidi before the war, now one could hardly find a room for 20 mejidi.

<sup>26</sup> Editorial, “Bnakarani Hartce” [The Rent Issue], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 14, 1923, 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Benakaranneru Vardzki Khendire” [The Rent Issue], *Suriakan Mamul*, July 26, 1923, 3.

<sup>28</sup> “Benakaranneru Vardzkerun Hamar Partadervatc Nor Orenke” [The New Imposed Law for the Rents], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 16, 1923, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Archives of Délégation Nationale Arménienne de Paris (hereafter DNA), Nubar Library, Paris, Noratunkian to Sahak II, February 18, 1922, file 66/1 cited in Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits Patmutyun Katoghikosoutyan Hayots Kilikio (1914-1972)* [The Contemporary History of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1914–1972] (Antelias, 1975), 265; DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, from Melkonian to Noratunkian January 24, 1922.

<sup>30</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, 1 From Noratunkian to Sahak II (1136), February 18, 1922.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Editorial, “Halebe Ibr Gaghtavayr” [Aleppo as a Colony], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 16, 1922, 1.

At the close of the next year, in December 1923, Armenian refugees were once again the main topic in the Alepine press. This time the attention came as a result of the discussions at the Council of the Syrian Federation in Damascus. *Al-Taqaaddum* reported that al-Barazé, the deputy from Hama, had demanded that admission of the Armenian refugees to Syria should be forbidden. He had argued that there were 130,000 Armenians in Syria while 120,000 Syrians had reportedly left for other countries. In response, Sheikh Seya Jumbert – a deputy from Aleppo, announced that Arabs could not deny hospitality to the Armenians, not only for the sake of humanity but also because the country had significantly benefited economically from their presence. Another deputy from Aleppo, Sayid Beshur, added his voice to Jumbert's. Barazé insisted on a vote on the issue. Jumbert opposed him, declaring that there were about 60,000 needy refugees in Aleppo and “we must not create new issues for them.” In the end, Subhi Barakat announced that no new refugees would be allowed and that those already in Syria would be settled on empty lands.<sup>33</sup> *Al Taqaaddum* explained that it was wrong to tie the emigration of the Syrians to the presence of the Armenian refugees:

The emigration of the Syrians is nothing new; it has always been the case... If we wish to be honest, we shall confess that Syria has benefited greatly from the Armenian refugees; the life in the cities has started to flourish, and trades flourish. Armenians have never been a burden... We shall think about how to be more useful to the Armenians, as their arrival has been useful for us. Thus, real nationalism demands that we should shelter this nascent nation in our country for the profit of our own country.<sup>34</sup>

It is no surprise then that *Suriakan Mamul* declared that every Armenian should read the issues of *Al-Taqaaddum*, whose editors are real *nationalists*, with great pleasure. It would have been interesting to know what *Al-Suriya al-Shemaliya* and *An-Nahda*, papers that usually published critical views, had to say. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know since both papers were censored during this period for several months. However, two other Damascene newspapers had been critical, as is obvious in the response crafted by the *Suriakan Mamul*:

The Arab nation must know that we did not come here for the sake of trade. We do not speak Arabic, so it is impossible for us to create competition for you. On the contrary, refugees deprived of everything must work hard in order not to be a burden on anyone and support the development of the country. We are hopeful that the French authorities and Arab hosts will continue their support until it is possible for the refugees to leave for their homeland.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Al-Taqaaddum*, cited in “Hay Gaghtakanner Khndire Surio Federatsioni Mej” [The Issue of Armenian Refugees Before the Syrian Federal Council], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 30, 1923, 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Al-Taqaaddum*, December 27, 1923, cited in “Mamul” [Press], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 6, 1924, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Edit., “Surio Hay Gaghtakannere” [The Armenian Refugees of Syria], *Suriakan Mamul*, Decem. 30, 1923, 2.

The French delegate in Aleppo confirmed that the Alepines had mostly been sympathetic toward the refugees from the beginning but later became largely indifferent. Only recently, they had adopted an anti-refugee stance because they wished to share the refugee burden with other regions.<sup>36</sup> The French representative expressed this viewpoint in Lausanne, where the negotiations were still underway. He confirmed that there was no anti-Armenian rhetoric but that there were economic concerns.<sup>37</sup>

For these early years, we do not have copies of the Syrian nationalist press from Damascus to compare with the Aleppo press. If the analyses of the later periods represent a pattern, we can safely assume that the Damascene press would have been much more critical and “anti-refugee” compared to the Aleppo media. There are various explanations for this. First, the Damascene press was much more easily and readily influenced by the Turkish press, and rumors spread in Beirut and elsewhere. As we have shown already, the Turkish propaganda aimed to convince the Syrians that the unwanted French mandate was sustained solely by the Armenian refugees. For the Alepines, on the other hand, the falseness of these claims was clear. Moreover, they did not seem to be disturbed by the refugee presence and apparently felt compassion for their suffering. Instead, more practical issues, such as unemployment, high prices, and low wages, were raised, and possible solutions were suggested. Moreover, the vote by the local Representative Council to allocate financial aid to the refugees was not an isolated action nor imposed on them by the French. In the later chapters, we shall see that, in reality, there was a reasonably consistent policy to deal with the refugee issues constructively, often in cooperation with the refugee leaders and against the wishes of the French mandatory authorities or the Syrian nationalists of Damascus.

### **The Aleppo delegation and the citizenship offer**

The newly appointed French Commissioner, General Sarrail, arrived in Beirut at the beginning of January 1925. Before his arrival, the departing High Commissioner, General Weygand, had already approved new arrangements for Syria, under which Aleppo and Damascus were unified under a single state. Subhi Barakat was appointed the head of the newly created unified Syrian State.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> CADN-SL 966, Le délégué adjoint du Haut-Commissaire Président de la Commission à Le Monsieur Haut-Commissaire, “Rapport, des réfugiés arméniens à Alep,” 3 mars 1923.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of the meeting LoN’s minority subcommittee, 26 December 1923, Geneva, cited in Vahan Papazian, *Im husheres* [My Memoirs] (Cairo: Husaber, 1957), vol. 3:424.

<sup>38</sup> “Suriakan Petutyun Sahmandruytune” [The Constitution of Syria], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 14, 1924, 2. Alexandretta sanjak, however, no more belonged to Aleppo vilayet.

After Sarrail's arrival, delegations from different parts of Syria rushed to meet and welcome him in his new position, putting forward their specific demands. According to *L'Orient*, the Damascus delegation had demanded the removal of Subhi Barakat because appointed heads were not acceptable anymore<sup>39</sup> and requested a legislative body to work on a constitution as well as Syrian unity, including Lebanon.<sup>40</sup> The most interesting for us, were, of course, the demands put forward by the Aleppo delegation.

On January 19, 1925, an important meeting was convened in Aleppo, at the house of Abdulrahman Jabiri, with the participation of more than 100 delegates, where it was decided to send a delegation to meet Sarrail. Thirty-six notables were immediately appointed and tasked with choosing 15 individuals to be members of that delegation. The next day, the 36 men met at the house of Dr. Kayyali and elected 15 delegates headed by Ihsan Al-Jabiri and Dr. Kayyali. The delegation left for Beirut on January 22, 1925.<sup>41</sup> They put forward 16 demands in total, which included Syrian unity within its geographical borders, dismissal of Barakat, the election of a legislative body to draft a constitution, and (re)establishment of the former Ottoman constitution in the interim. The delegation also demanded the limitation of French interference in Syrian internal affairs, a general amnesty for the political prisoners, assured independence of the courts, the appointment of a Muslim committee to control the Hejaz railroad, making Arabic the state language, and demolishing the existence of all the political communities, so that everyone was considered Syrian. One of the points specifically mentioned the refugees. The delegation demanded an end to the admission of new refugees *and recognizing the existing refugees as citizens in order to prevent any foreign influence over them (nergaghti argelume ev gaghtakanneru otar azgutyants mejen hanvile, kam vorpes erkratsi nkatvele)*.<sup>42</sup>

This point was repeated in another article quoted from the Damascene *Alef-Ba'*, which, however, stated only the demand to stop the admission of new refugees and not the demand for

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<sup>39</sup> Earlier Barakat was criticized for not being a "real" Syrian, he came from Antioch and could hardly speak a few sentences correctly in Arabic. His native tongue was Turkish. See in Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 127.

<sup>40</sup> *L'Orient*, 17 January cited in "Suriakan Patvirakutyun Pahanjnere" [The Demands put Forward by the Syrian Delegation], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 18, 1925, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Among them, there were also Hanano, Besim al Kudsi, Emide Salim, Kustaki Homsî, Housen Tarabeshi, Abdul Wahab Myuser, Abdulla As-Sadid, and others.

<sup>42</sup> These demands were not shared by all the Alepines. It was said that other groups of notables planned to appeal the High Commissioner with their own demands, while another delegation from Raqqa demanded a few regions to be detached from Deir ez-Zor and re-attached to Aleppo. "Halepi Patviarkutyun Me ev Anor Pahanjnere" [An Alepine Delegation and its Demands], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 25, 1925, 2. "Urish Patvirakutyun Me" [Another delegation], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 25, 1925, 2. (Emphasized by the author).

citizenship for the existing ones.<sup>43</sup> Sarrail's response to this last demand was almost immediate as we shall see below.

Notably, almost all other delegations also had demands concerning the Armenian refugees, often conflicting and controversial, as was the case with their attitude toward Subhi Barakat. If Alepines demanded citizenship for the Armenians to keep them away from foreign influence, others demanded a halt to the migration or a reduction of the number of refugees already in Syria. Often, petitions with opposite messages were sent from the same region. This was the case, for example, for Kurd Dagh and Jarablus, each of which sent two different petitions – one supporting Subhi Barakat and one against him.<sup>44</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many Syrian press outlets devoted articles to these delegations and their demands. According to *Al-Taqaddum*, the Aleppo delegation was received warmly, while the Damascene delegation had a cooler reception. The latter had demanded Syrian unity, including Lebanon.<sup>45</sup> This not only reflected the competition between the two rival cities but also showed their different political perspectives.

*Echo d'Orient* published an interview with Subhi Barakat, whose appointment had triggered all this debate. The latter had rightly noted that, while until now French presence was considered as *colonization* and a *dictatorship* for almost all these actors, now it seemed they all recognized the French mandate, either through their demands for Barakat's dismissal as the head of the unified Syrian State or by pledging their loyalty to him through the French mandatory authorities.<sup>46</sup>

As soon as the Aleppo delegation returned, a meeting was convened on January 28, 1925, at the Hotel Baron to present the results of their trip. *Suriakan Mamul* reported that the notables of Damascus and Aleppo had met and decided to join forces by forming a new political party with the name of *Hizb Al-Sha'b* (People's Party). The Party aimed to follow up on the demands submitted to the High Commissioner.<sup>47</sup>

On January 30, 1925, merely a week after the reception of the Aleppo delegation, General Sarrail issued his order regarding Syrian and Lebanese citizenship. On February 6, the first article on citizenship appeared in *Suriakan Mamul*, summarizing the most important

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<sup>43</sup>Cited in "Surio Muityan Nakhagahi Khendire" [The Issue of the President for the Syrian State], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 16, 1925, 3.

<sup>44</sup>"Hanragrutyune Me" [A Petition], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 8, 1925, 2-3.

<sup>45</sup>*Al-Taqaddum*, January 27, 1925, cited in "Helptsinere Zoravar Sarayi Mot" [Alepines Met with Sarrail], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 30, 1924, 3.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>"Nor Enkerutyun Me" [A New Political Party], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 4, 1925, 3.

articles.<sup>48</sup> From that moment on, the entire Armenian and the Syrian press, as well as the public, were occupied with the citizenship issue.

It is noteworthy that both the mandatory and the Lebanese authorities recalled the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty regarding the award of citizenship. They declared that it was an international treaty that neither the French nor Lebanese could modify. In other words, the responsibility for citizenship rested with the Lausanne Treaty and not with the local or mandatory authorities. Lebanese press outlets quoted the key articles of the Lausanne Treaty (Articles 30 and 31), which stated that “on the lands cut off from Turkey, the former Ottoman subjects shall become citizens of the country to which these lands are attached according to the *local laws*.” Moreover, according to Article 30, all those who were 18 and over and had lost their Turkish citizenship had two years to reapply for it on the condition that Turkey confirmed it.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, this seemed to be the desired option for most of the refugees, as we shall see later. Very quickly, it became obvious that not only had Sarrail renewed the proposition of citizenship to the Armenians, but there was a hidden side to it. What followed was organized pressure on the Armenian refugees through their leaders to take citizenship as quickly as possible. It had been almost half a year since the first declaration by Weygand, and, surprisingly, it had not been debated among any of the Armenian national bodies, nor had it been commented on in any way by the Catholicos. When Dr. Melkonian wrote to General Sarrail at the beginning of February 1925 asking him to raise the issue of Armenian abandoned properties in Turkey with the Turkish authorities, who had already issued confiscation orders, as he was doing for the Syrians, the response was unexpected. Sarrail told him that he was willing to do so but could not. In order for the French to be able to intervene on behalf of the Armenians, the latter had first to take Syrian and Lebanese citizenship.<sup>50</sup>

The High Commissioner’s announcement tying the citizenship to the abandoned properties was a strategic step and understandably appealed instantly to every refugee. If it was not clear to the Armenian refugees what local citizenship could do for them, the prospect of recovering their properties, or at least some of them, as a way to overcome their current destitute state was a powerful one. Ironically, if by granting citizenship, the French authorities wished to

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<sup>48</sup> “Suriatsiutyan Paymannere” [The Requirements for Syrian Citizenship], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 6, 1925, 2.

<sup>49</sup> “Pashtonakan Haghordagrutyun” [Official Announcement], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 8, 1925, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Editorial, “Hpatakututyun ev Lekyal Guykeru Hartsere: Hamasuriakan Hamagumari Konferansi Me Gumarman Anhrajestutyune” [The Issue of the Abandoned Properties and the Citizenship: The Necessity for a Conference], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 11, 1925, 1. For more on this episode, see Vahe Tachjian, “An Attempt to Recover Armenian Properties in Turkey through the French Authorities in Syria and Lebanon in the 1920s,” *International Criminal Law Review* 14 (2014), 343-357. About the confiscation of the Armenian properties by the Turkish government, see Ellinor Morack, *The Dowry of the State? The Politics of Abandoned Property and the Population Exchange in Turkey, 1921-1945* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2017).



claim these refugees for the Syrian state, the refugees themselves hoped to reach beyond the borders of the Syrian state to reclaim their lost properties.

In Paris, discussions were effectively underway regarding compensation for the French and Syrian lost properties in Cilicia, and everything seemed real. The High Commissioner had stated explicitly that the Armenian abandoned properties could also be made a discussion topic if the refugees accepted Syrian citizenship and came fully under the jurisdiction of the French mandate. Moreover, the refugees were urged to act quickly since the chief negotiator on behalf of the French government, was to arrive in Beirut soon.<sup>51</sup> These were not just empty declarations; an actual process had started with the preparation of detailed lists of the properties left behind.<sup>52</sup> However, the result of this endeavor was to be yet another disappointment, as the future would show.

Meanwhile, the question seemed to be a simple one for the refugees who could choose to either accept the citizenship, settle down, and be compensated for their lost properties, or reject it and leave; but where to?

In Beirut, the registration of the refugees started right away. It was billed as a simple census procedure to be completed within two months. That the reason behind the registration rush was, in fact, elections and not a census is evident from a piece of news shared by *Suriakan Mamul*. The paper stated that those families whose male head was absent were not registered at all.<sup>53</sup> Only adult men were allowed to vote; thus, families who did not have their adult males were useless for the true purpose for which they were being registered.

*Suriakan Mamul* reported that Dr. Melkonian had been recently summoned to a meeting with the Governor of Greater Lebanon and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. As a result, it was decided to establish three offices in the neighborhoods where Armenians were in large numbers to speed up the registration process.<sup>54</sup> *Pyunik*, the ARF organ of Beirut, for its part, reported on a meeting of its chief editor, Tutunjian, with Cayla, the former governor of Greater Lebanon. Cayla had reportedly advised the Armenians to hurry up and register for citizenship to improve their uncertain status. He had also revealed that the registration was to take place discreetly, in each neighborhood separately, since political circumstances did not favor a central registration office.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Tesaktsutyun Fransiakan Hanrapetutyun Sirio Bardzr Komiser Zoravar Sarryi het” [Meeting with the French High Commissioner, General Sarrail], *Pyunik*, January 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Vahé Tachjian, “An Attempt.”

<sup>53</sup> “Hayeru Ardzanagutyune” [The Registration of the Armenians], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 12, 1925, 3.

<sup>54</sup> “Libananahayeru Hpatakutyune” [Citizenship of the Armenians of Lebanon], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 18, 4.

<sup>55</sup> “Leratu: Tesaktsutyun Caila-i Het” [Meeting with Caila], *Pyunik*, February 7, 1925, 4.

Clearly, the Armenians were pushed to accept local citizenship without being able to debate the issue internally. Moreover, the process was conducted in close coordination with the French and Lebanese high officials and relied on intervention by the Armenian leaders as intermediaries. Melkonian announced that a two-month period was given to register, and those who failed to do so were to be punished and even expelled from Greater Lebanon. Furthermore, he added that, after the registration, another list was to be prepared for the abandoned properties in Cilicia and beyond (house, lands, fields, and orchards). Dr. Melkonian, naturally, urged everyone to accept the local citizenship, which provided an excellent way to shed off the humiliating “refugee” label, strengthen their political and civil position, and find employment in public administration. He also referred to the possibility of participating in the upcoming communal and legislative elections.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, through indirect threats and vigorous promotion of the advantages of citizenship the Armenian refugees were persuaded to register at an incredible speed. The reason for this extraordinary rush was the wish of the French authorities to have legislative elections in Lebanon as soon as possible and by April 1925, at the latest. There was a need to increase the number of Christian voters, especially in Beirut. By 1925, there were 40,000 Armenians in Lebanon, almost all of whom lived in Beirut. The easiest solution, identified by the French (and their Maronite allies), had been the granting of citizenship to the Armenians, making them the largest Christian community in Beirut, who received the right to appoint one out of the three deputies in the city.<sup>57</sup> As in Beirut, Armenians formed the largest minority in Aleppo, where they could play a similar role during the elections.<sup>58</sup>

It was no wonder, then, that Armenian participation in the elections in both Syria and Lebanon was hotly debated and contested each time. Myriad reasons were behind it; although the Aleppo delegation had demanded citizenship for the refugees, the Damascene nationalists were against the proposal. Moreover, citizenship, a major concession, immediately conferred more rights, especially the right to elect and be elected. The Syrians’ suspicion that the move was yet another tool to strengthen French colonial rule was widespread. It was no wonder that such exceptional treatment and the fast track to political participation made the Armenian refugees the primary focus of public debates both in Syria and Lebanon. It inevitably also

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<sup>56</sup> “Libanahayeru Hepatakutyune.”

<sup>57</sup> CADN-SL 574, Huat-Commissaire à le gouverneur du territoire Soueida, “Note, sur les questions armeniennes dans les etats sous mandat francais,” Beyrouth, novembre 26, 1935.

<sup>58</sup> According to 1922 census, there were 97,600 Muslims, 17,579 Armenian refugees, 7,481 Greek Catholics, 6,580 Jews and several other smaller communities, see in “Halep Qaghaq” [Aleppo City], *Suriahay Taregirk* [The Armenian Syrian yearbook] (Cairo: Zareh Berberian, 1924), 8.

opened a debate on issues such as “who was a Syrian citizen?” Who was entitled to receive citizenship, and who could vote?

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popular conception of belonging in Ottoman Syria was rooted in the communitarianism, under an identity granted by birth or descent.<sup>59</sup> The initial flexibility to choose between a state-centered identity (Ottoman *nefus* paper) and a national one changed quickly after the establishment of the mandates.<sup>60</sup> The latter not only tightened the border controls to curtail or channel the circulation of people, (as well as goods and ideas) but were also keen to define the “citizens” and “foreigners.”<sup>61</sup> As explained by Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, the bordering process in the early 1920s was “less about establishing physical barriers than about delimiting the actual site of the boundary, around which a new regime of mobility could be constructed.”<sup>62</sup> The refugee issue was arguably one of them. The latter not only crossed borders fleeing persecution but were soon compelled to (re)define their identity in the host countries. The mandatory authorities made it compulsory for everyone to have identity cards and citizenship, imposing on them a state-sponsored nationality as a way of surveillance. The introduction of sovereign territoriality, on the other hand, was accompanied by the efforts of the emerging ruling elites to redefine the criteria of belonging.<sup>63</sup>

According to Engin Isin, the discursive construction of the Citizen and the Other (alien) emerges from a mutually constitutive dialogue.<sup>64</sup> As noted by Macklin in her article “Who is the Citizen’s Other?” the designations “alien,” “foreigner,” or even “stranger” draw the lens back from the interior of the community to the limning function of citizenship.<sup>65</sup> She further

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<sup>59</sup> Lauren Banko, “Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under Mandate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 46:2 (2017), 27.

<sup>60</sup> Passports and internal travel documents had become widespread in the later Ottoman period. For more on this, see David Gutman, “Travel Documents, Mobility Control, and the Ottoman State in an Age of Global Migration, 1880-1915,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 3:2 (2016), 347-368; İlkay Yılmaz, “Governing the Armenian Question through Passports in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876-1908),” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 32:4 (2019) 388-403. Bureaucratic records showed that most people did not collect the identification documents, see Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 70-74.

<sup>61</sup> For more on the mobility and borders in the Middle East during the interwar years, see Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, ed., *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). For more on the passports and identity cards as new surveillance methods, see John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); J.S. Migdal, ed., *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identity and Local Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “Introduction,” ed., *Regimes of Mobility*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “Toward Connected Histories of Refugeeedom in the Middle East,” *Journal of Migration History*, 6:1 (2020), 2.

<sup>64</sup> Isin, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Audrey Macklin, “Who Is the Citizen’s Other? Considering the Heft of Citizenship,” *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, vol. 8:2 (2007), 332-366, 338.

observed that exclusionary practices persisted in the face of the extension of rights to non-citizens. In this context, we can explain the Syrian nationalist discourse vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees, especially during their participation in elections.

French policies not only had an important impact on the Syrians and the incoming Armenian refugees but also on their relations, which were largely mediated by a third power – the French mandatory authorities. Reflecting on these events, historian White concluded that because a third power, the French authorities, had allowed the refugees to settle, granting them citizenship and voting rights without even formally consulting the nominative Syrian government, had created a sovereignty crisis among the Syrians.<sup>66</sup> Hence, the aggressive discourse of the Syrian nationalists vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees. This holds true for the nationalist press of Damascus but not for Aleppo. What was the reason for it? Was it that the vast majority of the refugees lived in Aleppo and not in Damascus, which meant that the refugees were in daily contact with the city's citizens in Aleppo, which was not the case in Damascus? Was it due to the fact that both Syrians and Armenian were former Ottoman subjects, and the vast majority of the Armenian refugees in Syria came from the former Ottoman vilayet of Aleppo and Alepines shared a certain solidarity with them? Or was it because Aleppo had always been a cosmopolitan city composed of diverse ethnic and religious communities and was less concerned with pan-Islamism than the Syrian nationalists of Damascus? We do not have a definite answer to this, and probably all the questions are relevant. However, Veldkamp's recent study showing the extent to which Aleppo and Damascus and their nationalist policies differed from each other certainly provides clues.<sup>67</sup> The next chapter attempts to showcase the difference between the discourses in Damascus and Aleppo vis-à-vis the citizenship opportunities for the Armenians.

### **Who was a “Syrian” citizen? Syrian and Lebanese nationalist press and the Armenian citizenship**

The Syrian and Lebanese press outlets immediately commented on the news of the citizenship opportunities. Lebanese *Al-Arz* noted that the importance of the recently adopted laws could hardly be overlooked. The problems caused by the refugees to the traders and small artisans, which had created fierce competition, were well-known. Refugees who lived in Syria for only three years were already being offered citizenship... “Armenians are known for being

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<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-1939,” *Past and Present*, N:235 (2017), 141-178, 144.

<sup>67</sup> More on this, see Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s.”

conservative, insisting on their traditions... No one can deny the damage that their permanent settlement will bring. They did not give up their customs even in these difficult conditions, just, on the contrary, regrouped further in closed circles, doubled their work.” The paper compared their presence to a slow invasion. At present, they were competing with the locals to improve their conditions. Once the improvement was achieved, the natives would migrate elsewhere, leaving their country to the refugees. “Today’s powerful competitors will become tomorrow’s respected citizens.”<sup>68</sup>

Soon, rumors were spread that the Armenians would be given two seats in the Lebanese parliament. An article in *Al-Balegh* stated that the governor of Greater Lebanon had ordered that the number of Armenians should be added to the population total. As a result, Greater Lebanon was to have the right to 35 deputies, including two Armenians, two Maronites, and one Druze.<sup>69</sup>

A few days after its first article, *Al-Arz* published another, claiming that, out of the five deputies who were to be elected from Beirut, two would be Armenian. It stated that all the evidence suggested that the citizenship law was created specifically for the Armenians. However, it advised the government to be careful with the Armenians, who were undoubtedly great entrepreneurs, but difficult to assimilate ... they would always work for their own interests. After obtaining local citizenship, the Armenians would soon demand greater representation in the administration of the country and more seats. The author then recalled a recent article by *Al-Ahwar* (Cairo), which explained that the Armenians had only four deputies in the Ottoman parliament.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, they had more power than the other 70, thanks to their unity. If four deputies could exert so much influence in the Ottoman parliament, what was to be expected from these two deputies? Was it possible there would be an Armenian on the presidential chair one day?<sup>71</sup> *Al-Ahwar* did not explain which “power” did it ascribe to the four deputies who had been unable to even protect their own people from the massacres.

*Al-Ahwal*, for its part, wondered which of the world’s governments would wish to bring foreigners, who were different in “religion, customs, soul, and thought,” and enable them to participate in the country’s administration. Other countries did the opposite by expelling or

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<sup>68</sup> “Arab Mamule ev Hayere” [The Arab Press and the Armenians], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 15, 1925, 3; “Teghakan Arab Mamule Hayeru Masin” [The Local Arab Press about Armenians], *Pyunik*, February 7, 1925, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Translated from *Al-Balagh*, February 16, 1925, “Hayere Libanani Nerkayachutchakan Khorherdi Mej” [Armenians in the Lebanese Representative Council], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 18, 1925, 3.

<sup>70</sup> About the Armenian deputies in the Ottoman parliament, see Elke Hartmann, “The “Loyal Nation” and its Deputies. The Armenians in the First Ottoman Parliament,” in *The First Ottoman Experiment in Democracy*, ed. Christoph Herzog and Malek Sharif (Beirut: Orient Institute, 2010), 187-222.

<sup>71</sup> Translated from Karim al-Bustani *Al-Arz*, February 14, 1925, “Teghakan Mamul: Hayer Yerespokhanakan Joghvi Mej” [Local Press: Armenians in the Representative Council], *Pyunik*, February 21, 1925, 2.

exchanging their populations. It asked rhetorically, “if Armenians were the hosts, would they agree to host the Syrians and treat them the same way?” It was a fact that *Armenians did not consider Syria their homeland... They are guests, and a guest can never become a host*, nor he can have any saying in the administration of the house. If France wished to compensate Armenians because of her disastrous policies in Cilicia, it was not fair to do so at the expense of the Syrians...<sup>72</sup>

*La Syrie*, which was the mouthpiece of the High Commissioner, on its part, wrote that, according to the rumors, Armenians were to be given the right to have two representatives in the parliament.<sup>73</sup> The article in *La Syrie* seemed to prepare the locals and test their moods. It was only understandable that such articles in the form of rumors would create reactions and make it possible to know whether the general mood was for or against such a decision. The importance of rumors should not be overlooked, as shown by historian Tejel.<sup>74</sup> In this particular case, rumors were important tools employed by the French-subsidized *La Syrie* (as well as other French-sponsored papers, as we shall witness throughout this dissertation) to influence the Damascene nationalist press.

Notably, the issue of *Suriakan Mamul* that had quoted the rumors also gave another example of anti-Armenian provocation by re-publishing an article from the Damascene *Al-Oumran* paper. This new article claimed that it was being said that a few Armenians had been invited to work for high salaries in the ministry of finance. It urged the authorities not to accept them, for it was against “our homeland and our interests.”<sup>75</sup> *Al-Oumran* was not the only paper publishing such material. Another Damascene paper, *Echo Al-Arab*, published a lengthy article criticizing the governor of the city for having recruited a large number of Armenians to the public administration.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, another paper, *Al-Mufid*, explicitly tied the new appointments to rumors that an Armenian deputy was to be elected in the Syrian parliament, as had happened in Lebanon.

We have repeated and repeat again that *Syria is an Arab country* and shall be run by *capable Syrians*. Nevertheless, many high positions are still filled up by the Armenians

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<sup>72</sup> Translated from *Al-Ahwal*, “Teghakan Mamul: Hayere Ke Paykarin Mezme Arnelu Yerespokhanakan Atornere” [Local News: Armenians Wish to take our Deputy Seats], *Pyunik*, March 4, 1925, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Tejel has shown how continuous rumors of possible invasions brought the Syrian and Turkish states to increase their presence on the border during the interwar years and by doing so, accelerated the de facto bordering process, see Jordi Tejel, “States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925-1945,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 37:1 (2020), 95-113.

<sup>75</sup> “Hakahay Provokacion Me” [An Anti-Armenian Provocation], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 18, 1925, 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Echo Al-A'la* (Damascus), “Dardzyl Hayere” [Once Again the Armen.], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 29, 1925, 2.

and Turks...What angers most our capable Syrians is the fact that... their rights are being undermined by the foreigners as a result of arbitrary and dishonest policies.<sup>77</sup>

Such discourse was by no means new. As we have seen in Part I of this dissertation, it was also common during Faysal's era, when Syrians and Lebanese were irritated by the presence of the large number of "foreigners" in their public administration, who back then were mostly Iraqis, Palestinians, and Turks. Whenever a new "foreigner" was appointed, Syrians were alerted that the former policy of stuffing their public administration with "foreigners" was continuing at their expense. In reality, only a few Armenians served in the public administration. In mid-1925, for example, there were only 50 Armenians employed in the public administration in Aleppo (banks and railway).<sup>78</sup> Moreover, there was only one person appointed in a higher public office.<sup>79</sup> It is clear that, more than the new appointments in the public administration, it was the possibility of having an Armenian deputy in the Syrian parliament that frightened the Syrians.

*La Syrie* continued to influence and feed the Damascene nationalist press. If it had previously published articles to prepare the local audience for the new policies by publishing "rumors," it now published more details on news that was no longer a "rumor" but a reality. *La Syrie* informed its readers that during the Council meeting of Greater Lebanon, a decision was taken to allow all the "foreign refugees, including the Armenians," to vote in the coming elections. First of all, they needed to register to determine their exact numbers, after which electoral lists would be prepared.<sup>80</sup>

Inevitably, after this news was confirmed, many more articles were devoted to the issue, especially in the Damascus papers, which nervously followed the developments in Lebanon. Arguably, it was not the citizenship that worried the Damascene nationalists the most, but the fact that citizenship by itself being a major right came packaged with two more significant rights – the right to vote and the right to stand for election.

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<sup>77</sup> Translated from *Al-Mufid* (Damascus), February 19, 1925, "Nerkin Lurer: Suria: Hay Yerespokhan Me Surio Khorherdarani Mej" [Internal News: Syria: An Armenian Deputy in the Syrian Parliament], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 22, 1925, 3. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>78</sup> In mid-1925, among the 20,000 male Armenian refugee population of Aleppo, there were 32 doctors, 15 pharmacists, 85 dentists, 10 lawyers, 60 mechanics, 350 drivers, 21 priests, 250 teachers, 250 money lenders, 600 shopkeepers, 160 shoe-makers, 450 carpenters, 300 blacksmiths, 150 tinsmiths, 1500 masons, 850 net weavers, 8000 carpet and embroidery makers, 6000 daily wagers and only 50 persons were employed in the public administration (banks, railways, other), J. A. Papikian, "Surian ev Hayutyune, Tentesakan Katsutyune" [Syria and the Armenians, the Economic Situation] (c), *Arev*, August 26, 1925, 1-2.

<sup>79</sup> This person was Yervand Zorian, the finance director of Aleppo vilayet. "Vitsakagrakan Teghekutyunner Halepi Hayotc masin," [Statistical Data About the Armenians of Aleppo], *Arev*, January 23, 1928, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Translated from *La Syrie* "Nor Entrutyants Mej Hayeru Masnaksutyune" [The Participation of the Armenians in the New Elections] *Suriakan Mamul*, February 27, 1925, 3.

*Fata al-Arab* noted that citizenship law in both countries was identical and foresaw that *foreigners*, including the Armenians, would be able to apply for it if they had lived in Syria for five years. However, it was not just the citizenship issue. In Lebanon, Armenians were also entitled to have two deputies; tomorrow, the same would be the case in Syria, where the number of Armenians grew constantly. There was no doubt that soon, Syrians would lose influence in their own country. “Therefore, every Syrian shall know that the presence of the Armenians is a threatening danger. If left unchecked, Syria and Lebanon would be soon called ‘Armenia’.”<sup>81</sup> On February 28, 1925, *La Syrie* published a lengthy article aiming to dissipate the ongoing anti-Armenian sentiments. It stated that all the accusations were exaggerated; while 30–35,000 Armenians were not a negligible group, they formed only 5% of the total population. Armenian refugees were neither conquerors nor rulers; they were the survivors of an unfortunate people (victims of genocide). The perception that refugees enjoyed special treatment from charity organizations was equally wrong,<sup>82</sup> and it was untrue that the refugees did not pay taxes. Finally, the author, who was, in fact, the director of the journal, made a call to accept the Armenians as brothers, who were valuable assets and should not be feared.<sup>83</sup>

The Damascene *Al-Zaman*, for its part, published an article to reassure the Syrian nationalists by showing the remarkable indifference of the refugees toward the citizenship opportunity. It declared that the decision of the High Commissioner to give voting rights to the Armenians had caused much noise in the press. Such a decision was not only against the Lausanne Treaty but also against the refugees’ wishes. The paper wondered how many refugees met the criteria for citizenship and how many had actually applied? The article also noted that, in fact, no one had applied. It further wondered if any country or authority, even if he were the French High Commissioner, had the right to oblige the refugees to take citizenship against their will.<sup>84</sup> The French-language *Le Reveil*,<sup>85</sup> published in Beirut, shared the same worries:

Nowhere in the world an entire community is made citizens overnight, not even by the norms of international law. *Secondly, it is not for the mandatory authorities to decide on such matters but for the natives.* Thirdly, *Armenians are not enthusiastic* about this decision. And even if they were, according to the law, they must first have the right to elect and only 10 years later could have the right to be elected. Furthermore, their presence in the parliament is not useful, for they are not familiar with the environment and the local

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<sup>81</sup> Translated from, Editorial, *Fata al-Arab* (Damascus), February 23, 1925 “Hayere Surieo ev Libanani Mej” [Armenians in Syria and Lebanon], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 1, 1925, 3; *Arev*, March 6, 1925, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Near East Relief (NER), for example, provided support to only the orphans, but even that was decreasing.

<sup>83</sup> George Vayssie, *La Syrie*, February 28, 1925, “Haykakan Nuynatcume” [The Armenian Naturalization], *Pyunik* March 4, 1925, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Translated from *Al-Zaman* (Damascus) February 26, 1925, “Hayeru Yerespokhanutyany Hartce” [The Issue of the Armenian Deputy], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 1, 1925, 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Le Reveil* was the only French language publication that existed before the French mandate, it was established in 1906.



conditions, nor do they speak the language. How they are supposed then to contribute to the adoption of the legal texts? Besides, they are “birds under our sky,” for they are leaving and going abroad in large numbers. If the flow continues, anyway tomorrow they shall have no right for even one chair for there will not be enough of them. We only hope that our government will not oblige Armenians to take Lebanese citizenship by military force.<sup>86</sup>

The *Le Reveil* article is telling in many ways, for it clearly demonstrates the Armenian opposition to citizenship, which we shall explore in detail below.

### **Alepine press vis-à-vis the Armenian citizenship**

Meanwhile, a completely different atmosphere prevailed in Aleppo, which, in fact, hosted the largest number of refugees. It seemed that all the noise regarding citizenship or voting rights did not concern them much. At the end of February 1925, Armenians celebrated *barekendan*, a religious festival similar to a carnival, to mark the end of winter. *Suriakan Mamul* reported that on the outskirts of the city, where the refugee camps stood, Armenians sang and danced, and many locals joined them.<sup>87</sup>

At the beginning of March 1925, Sarraïl honored the Alepines with his visit. The Alepine notables, who had reportedly asked the High Commissioner to grant autonomy to Aleppo, renewed their demand. Previously, they had already petitioned Weygand asking to make Aleppo the capital instead of Damascus.<sup>88</sup> As shown by Veldkamp, such petitions preceded the French rule, going back to Faysal’s era.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, during the four-centuries-long Ottoman rule, Aleppo, because of its geographical location and economic linkages, was better connected with Mosul and Diyarbakir, rather than Damascus. The latter, in its turn, was better connected with Hijaz, Beirut, and Palestine. Moreover, Aleppo and Damascus, two Ottoman vilayets, were united for the first time in the aftermath of WWI. Many Alepines had kept their former loyalties, as did some of their leaders, who had previously served in the Ottoman administration.<sup>90</sup> It would take many years (at least a decade) for some of the Alepines,

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<sup>86</sup> *Le Reveil*, cited in “Libananahayeru Hpatakutyune” [The Citizenship of the Armenians in Lebanon] *Suriakan Mamul*, February 22, 1925, 3. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>87</sup> “Tonakan Ore Me Halepi Mej” [A Festive Day in Aleppo], “Karnavale Halepi Mej” [Caraval in Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 25, 1925, 3.

<sup>88</sup> “Halep Vorpes Mayrakaghak” [Aleppo as the Capital], *Suriakan Mamul*, August, 14, 1924, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s,” the whole Chapter 4 on “Autonomy,” 142.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017).

including several prominent notables, to accept that the fate of Aleppo was irrevocably tied to the Syrian state with its current boundaries.<sup>91</sup>

It was during these days that *Suriakan Mamul* published an article publicly pledging Armenian support for such demands.<sup>92</sup> Now, however, in the light of citizenship and voting rights, Armenian sympathy for the autonomist demands of the Alepines was presented in another light. *Fata al-Arab*, of Damascus, published an angry article about the demands of the Alepines to detach Aleppo from Damascus. The article added that, unsurprisingly, those who had asked for such a thing were mostly Armenians, who wished to divide Syria by detaching Aleppo from Damascus. They would achieve their goal, and, instead of an Arab Syria, soon there would be an Armenian Syria. Syrians, therefore, needed to unite in the face of this danger.<sup>93</sup>

*Fata al-Arab* then tied the “Armenian” autonomist aspirations to another problematic issue – “Armenians had taken all the important governmental positions.” The paper then provided one example – a certain Hayrapetian appointed as advisor to the head of property administration in Damascus. The journalist then wondered how an Armenian who could not even speak the local language was appointed when there were so many capable Syrians. The paper hoped it would be possible to remove these Armenians from “our homeland.”<sup>94</sup> It becomes clear that an immediate threat – imaginary or real – was anticipated from the Armenian refugees in Damascus. Any single appointment, related or irrelevant events were tied together to support this theory. Alepine Syrian newspapers often responded to the accusations of their colleagues in Damascus directly. For example, *Al-Taqqaddum* published that “the Armenian who demanded the separation of Aleppo was none else but al-Haji Muhamed Subhi al-Basmaji, the Muslim editor of an Arabic language newspaper – *an-Nahda*.”<sup>95</sup> Here again, we observe an interesting trend – Damascene nationalist newspapers accused the Armenian refugees of real or imaginary misdoings, while Aleppo newspapers took to the floor to defend them.

If Damascene nationalists feared Armenian participation in elections, for the Alepines, there was nothing unusual in having Armenian non-refugees taking part. Local elections had taken place in Aleppo in October 1923, just two years ago, and the local, non-refugee Armenians had

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<sup>91</sup> Peter Sluglett, “Will the Real Nationalists Please Stand Up?” in *France, Syrie et Liban, 1918-1946 : Les Ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire*, ed. Nadine Méouchy (Damascus, Syria: Institut Français d’Etudes Arabes de Damas, 2002), 284; Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s.”

<sup>92</sup> “Halepi Pahanje” [The Demand of the Alepines], *Suriakan Mamul*, November 21, 1924, 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Fata al-Arab*, (Damascus) “Difficulties between Aleppo and Damascus,” March 16, 1925, “Dardzyal Hayeru Mise Ke Tsamvi” [Again Armenians are Blamed], *Suriakan Mamul* March 18, 1925, 3.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Al-Taqqaddum*, cited in “Djshmartutyán Batsahaytume” [The Truth], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 25, 1925, 3.

participated. Tellingly, on the occasion of those elections, a certain Armenian, Dr. Tigran Shatayan, had founded the “Syrian Progressive Party.”<sup>96</sup> Not only was a Syrian Armenian the founder of this newly established party, but the motto of the party was “*Syria for the Syrians*,” with the ultimate goal of creating a Syrian intelligentsia and a Syrian homeland.<sup>97</sup>

We learn from *Suriakan Mamul* that there were eight seats for Aleppo, four Muslim and four non-Muslim.<sup>98</sup> An Armenian deputy was usually elected from Antioch, not Aleppo. The elections of 1923 were the last ones in which Armenian participation was uncontested, and there was no discussion about the Armenians at all. However, a few years later, even the nationalist Damascene *Al-Sha‘b* claimed a somewhat different interpretation regarding citizenship for the Armenians. In September 1928, it announced that the granting of citizenship was a Syrian act (not a French one) done for the sake of Syrian national interests to achieve national unity (al-wahda al-qaūmiya).<sup>99</sup> Curiously, this interpretation was close to the one offered by the Aleppo delegation.

Historian White has convincingly argued that by engaging with the questions of citizenship and voting rights, Syrian nationalists tried essentially to define the Syrian nation.<sup>100</sup> Since citizenship not only defined the terms of inclusion but also exclusion,<sup>101</sup> these debates were important to imagine the “nation.”<sup>102</sup> Similar discursive impact on the construction of the identity on both the incoming refugees and the hosts is documented by historian Gatrell elsewhere.<sup>103</sup>

Were the Armenians, who came mostly from Ottoman Aleppo vilayet included or not in that Syrian nation? For the Damascene nationalists, who emphasized pan-Islamic unity and were primarily concerned with Syrian unity, and had minimal, if any, direct contact with the refugees, Christian Armenians were not part of it. For the Alepines, on the other hand, who shared the space with the Armenian refugees, and were in daily contact with them, the

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<sup>96</sup> Its other founding members were Dr. Behaddin, El-Katib, Beshir Zamrut, Nasreddin, Sami Nagush, Dr. Keazim.

<sup>97</sup> “Syriakan Arajadem Kusaktsutyune” [The Syrian Progressive Party], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 14, 1923, 3.

<sup>98</sup> “Entrutyunner” [Elections], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 14, 1923, 3.

<sup>99</sup> Adib Al-Sefdi, “Al-ṣ‘ubāt al-dīniyā wa al-jinsiyyā: ‘alā thikrial-mas‘alata al-sukan al-arman fi sūriya” [The Religious and Ethnic Difficulties in Syria: Settlement of the Armenians], *Al-Sha‘b*, September 27, 1928, 1: All other discussions in the LoN that were related in one way or other to the Armenian refugee settlement in Syria was reported too, see for example, “Al-lājūn wa al-arman” [The Armenian Refugees and the League of Nations], *Al-Sha‘b*, February 21, 1929, 3; “Masā‘la al-aqaliyyāt āmām ‘uṣaba alūmam” [The Issue of the Minorities Before the League of Nations], *Al-Sha‘b*, February 25, 1929, 2.

<sup>100</sup> White, “Refugees and the Definition.”

<sup>101</sup> Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “Toward Connected Histories,” 2.

<sup>102</sup> We draw here from the influential work of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Versio: Revisited, 2006).

<sup>103</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Indiana Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies, 2005), Chapter 7 “Refugees and the Constr. of ‘National’ Identity,” 141-154.

perspective was different. By demanding citizenship for the refugees, the Aleppo delegates wished to “nationalize” them, in order to keep them away from a possible foreign influence. By demanding the “nationalization” of thousands of Christian refugees, we can assume that the Alepines were less concerned with the Muslim identity of Syria. After all, Aleppo had always been a cosmopolitan town with diverse religious and ethnic communities.

In this story, what is not clear is why the Aleppo delegation had put forward such a demand and what had been the reaction of the Armenian refugee community. The demands of the Alepines to extend citizenship to the Armenian refugees to keep them away from foreign influence did not come as a surprise. In order to understand it better, we shall present the Armenian refugee community of Syria, its diversity, and the internal power struggle that kept the community in constant turmoil. In our opinion, this and the growing interest of certain external players, namely Soviet Armenia (and the USSR), that gradually claimed authority over the refugees were among the main reasons.

## **Chapter II: Armenians imagine the “nation”**

This chapter aims to show the internal diversity of the Armenian refugees of Syria, their diverse institutions, national bodies, and political parties, and the fierce internal power struggle. It is essential to acknowledge this diversity to understand why a common Armenian strategy could not be developed and why it is misleading to speak about the Armenian refugees as if they all belonged to the same “imagined” community. The chapter draws heavily on Armenian language sources, especially two local newspapers published in Aleppo and Beirut.

### **An imagined community or an imagined non-community?**

The internal diversity of the Armenian refugees was ignored not only by the Syrian hosts but also by the missionaries, French authorities, and even academic researchers. Yet, the diversity was such that it resembled an “imagined non-community” rather than an “imagined community.”<sup>104</sup> As survivors of the genocide, the refugees formed a veritable conglomeration of all kinds of people – wealthy, poor, proud mountain-dwellers, cosmopolitan urbanites, and provincial villagers, plus Armenian, Turkish and Kurdish speakers, and was disproportionately composed of women and children. All of them were now bound by shared origins and survival experiences. In addition, they were further divided along congregational lines: Apostolic,

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<sup>104</sup> I borrow the term from Tara Zahra, “Imagined Non-Communities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 69:1 (2010), 93-119.

Catholic, and Protestant. Political party affiliations completed the picture. Two political parties – Henschaks and the ARF – had traditionally been active among the Ottoman Armenians since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the aftermath of WWI, two more parties gradually emerged – the Ramkavars and the Communists. While the last two were relatively new in the Armenian reality, the former two were highly organized parties that nurtured secular ideologies unknown in Syria until that time.

The diversity among the refugees was such that Surmeyan lamented that Aleppo did not have its typical Armenian folklore since the refugees came from all over Cilicia, as well as Armenian highlights (Eastern Anatolian provinces) and had a wide variety of backgrounds.<sup>105</sup> It was, therefore, only natural that tensions and even hostility between these socially and culturally isolated groups were exacerbated in a new country and context, where physical survival was the primary goal. Loyalties and primary social solidarities were largely limited to kinship, religion, language, and lineage.<sup>106</sup> It meant that belonging was primarily understood not as a membership to the same *nation* or even the same hometown but rather as religious affiliations. Often, each religious group acted as if it were a different nationality.<sup>107</sup> The absence of a common language complicated the process. How, then, could such a segmented and divided people find common ground to form a community? Moreover, what could potentially unite them with a shared sense of belonging and a conscious Armenian identity? Since both the religion and the spoken languages only divided the refugees further, the solution was found in the promotion of a new language – the forgotten national language – Armenian. Therefore, language, rather than religion, soon emerged as the most important identity marker. Other than factors related to the Syrian context, there was also an internal power struggle that played a divisive role.

Before the arrival of the refugees, the Armenian community of Aleppo had a well-organized prelacy, which, in its turn, had a political consul, a board for the *wakfs*,<sup>108</sup> a consul responsible for the military draft, a board for the poor, and a board for the schools.<sup>109</sup> In addition there was also a Union (not to be confused with the National Union), formed on the example

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<sup>105</sup> Artavazd Surmeyan, *History of Aleppo* [The History of Armenians in Aleppo], vol. 3 (Paris, 1950), 972.

<sup>106</sup> Nikola B. Schahgaldian, “The Political Integration of an Immigrant Community into a Composite Society: The Armenians in Lebanon, 1920-1974,” (Unpublished Ph.D diss., Columbia University, 1979), 71.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>108</sup> Religious properties usually composed of a few khanats, that accommodated the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem and a few monasteries, there were 23 such *wakfs* in Aleppo.

<sup>109</sup> For the detailed statistics of the Armenians in Aleppo and Aleppo vilayet, as well as their internal organization, see Mihran Minasian, “Patmakan Antip Teghekagir Me Berio (Halepi) Temi Hayutyán Masin,” [Historical Review about the Aleppo Prelacy], *Banber Hayanstani Arxivneri*, N 1-2, (2007), 18-30, 21-23.

of the Cairo Armenian Union, which became known as the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU).

The initial efforts to represent the Armenian refugees in one voice were short-lived. On November 17, 1918, the local Armenian elite of Aleppo met and elected a new National Union.<sup>110</sup> Days later, in mid-December, Sahak II, the Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, arrived in Aleppo, tasked by the leaders of the victorious Allied forces General Allenby and George-Picot to form a National Union to represent the Armenians in a united front.<sup>111</sup> Instead of approving the newly formed national body, Sahak II dismissed it and formed another.<sup>112</sup> Although the new Union comprised prominent local personalities representing the three religious communities on a proportional basis, it created more division than unity, let alone a united national front.<sup>113</sup> For a while, the members of the former body that were now left out, acted in parallel. A few days later, a Refugee Council was also established.<sup>114</sup> These two types of institutions – National Unions and Refugee Councils – coexisted in all major cities in Syria and Lebanon, both having the refugees as their prime focus.<sup>115</sup> Social life, economic networks, and institutions including churches, schools, and charities, gradually emerged. Nevertheless, these bodies did little to overcome the internal diversity.

The National Union in Aleppo (and elsewhere in Syria and Lebanon) was traditionally dominated by the local, non-refugee Armenians. As of June 1920, the National Union was obliged to make room for the political party representatives, the AGBU, and the compatriotic unions (representing regions in Anatolia), growing from eight to 17 members.<sup>116</sup> This Union survived until April 1924, finally falling victim to the intrigues of the political parties.

Soon, a fierce struggle for influence and leadership broke out between the church, which had held power in the Ottoman empire, political parties, and the diverse national bodies.<sup>117</sup> The

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<sup>110</sup> Archives of the Armenian prelaty of Aleppo (AAPA), folder 5, 1918, 9-11, the whole list of the elected for diverse bodies are provided. I thank Khatchig Mouradian for sharing some of these files with me.

<sup>111</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 78.

<sup>112</sup> Sedrak Kepelian, “Armenian Faces from Cilicia” *Paykar*, 30, 34.

<sup>113</sup> The new members were Aram Topchian, Gabirel Khanjian, Girgor Enpajian, Grigor Shahramian, George Tappaghian, Dr. Khachik Poghossian, Mikayel Natanian, Hakob Voskanean, Pargev Papazeian, Sargis Grajian, Sargis Manukean, Onnik Mazlumian, see in AAPA, folder 5, 16 December 1918, 21.

<sup>114</sup> AAPA, fond 5, 21 December 1918, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 230.

<sup>116</sup> Compatriotic Unions had been formed among the Ottoman Armenians since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Members of the same community who had migrated either to bigger urban centers or abroad sent money to their native villages. As of 1924, there were 36 such unions in Aleppo, that had real power and stable financial means thanks to the donations received from their rich compatriots abroad. CADN-SL 575, Services des Renseignements, “Différents organisations existant à l’heure actuelle parmi les Arméniens d’Alep,” Alep, 10 août 1924.

<sup>117</sup> This process had started already in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ara Sanjian, “The Armenian Minority Experience in the Modern Arab World,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies*, Vol. 3:1 2001, 149-179, 155.

latter strived to sideline the church, emphasizing a secular national identity with non-religious attributes, such as language, culture, and literature.

However, since the Ottoman *millet* system of sectarianism was not only maintained in Syria but further enhanced by the French mandatory authorities, the Armenians figured as one confessional group among others. Furthermore, after receiving citizenship and voting rights, they were expected to participate actively in Syrian politics with their traditional political parties; thus, the Armenians were also a political community. How was it possible to wear so many hats simultaneously? How could Armenians manage to combine the religious, political, and secular façades?

### **A religious or a political community?**

During Ottoman times, the Apostolic church had been the only official representative of the community recognized by the Ottoman state through the *millet* system. However, by 1850, the community was further fragmented, and the Sultan also granted Armenian Catholics and Protestants official recognition. Finally, on July 19, 1916, the Ottoman authorities decided to merge the four Armenian patriarchates (Istanbul, Jerusalem, Aghtamar (Van), and Cilicia) into a single one with its seat in Jerusalem to be headed by Sahak II Khabayan (1903–1940). This new decision was intended to limit the authority of the church solely to religious affairs as opposed to previously enjoyed rights to organize the internal national life of the Ottoman Armenians (such as marriage, divorce, heritage, and education).<sup>118</sup> In August 1916, Sahak II was expelled from Sis, Cilicia, from where he left first for Idlib (Syria) and then Jerusalem.

After the Ottomans' defeat and the Allies' arrival, Sahak II went to Cilicia instead of Jerusalem as the religious leader or the Catholicos of the Ottoman Armenians. After the evacuation of Cilicia, Sahak II arrived in Aleppo in December 1921. He did not have a permanent seat before settling in Antelias, on the outskirts of Beirut, in October 1930.<sup>119</sup>

From the very start, Sahak II considered himself to have sole responsibility for the community of Syria and Lebanon as per Ottoman traditions and always signed as the supreme religious leader of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>120</sup> He addressed the refugees

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<sup>118</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 207.

<sup>119</sup> Armenian patriarchate of Jerusalem signed a contract with the NER to rent their buildings in Antelias with a one-dollar symbolic rent per year as NER reduced drastically its activities in the region. See in DNA, Fond "Transfert du Catholicossat de Sis à Antélias," from Sahak II to the High Commissioner, September 24, 1930.

<sup>120</sup> See in DNA, Fond "Transfert du Catholicossat de Sis à Antélias," Le Haut-Commissaire à Monsieur le Président du Conseil et Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, "Établissement en Syrie du "Catholicos" de Cilicie," Beyrouth, 5 juin 1924.

for the first time after the Cilician evacuation on February 28, 1922.<sup>121</sup> Then, he published several articles co-authored with Mikael Natanian, a famous intellectual from Aleppo, titled “The future of the Armenian refugees.” In these articles, it was argued that national revival was only possible around and under the church. Therefore, all national institutions, including schools, were to be formed under the auspices of the church, as had been the norm previously. It was also argued that the issue was not the language but the religion; Armenians could speak Turkish, Kurdish, or Armenian, and their Armenian identity was guaranteed as long as they adhered to the Armenian Apostolic church.<sup>122</sup> Sahak II noted that other Christian communities exercised influence over the local authorities through their patriarchates. Armenians needed to do the same in order to improve their status.<sup>123</sup> Sahak II had other concerns, too; the refugees would be assimilated more easily, and with greater speed, if left unorganized.<sup>124</sup> In order to prevent assimilation, he visited all the cities where there were a considerable number of refugees.<sup>125</sup> Everywhere he went, he met the local authorities and appointed committees.<sup>126</sup> This activity was largely criticized by the political parties, which had started to look for ways to contest church leadership and oblige it to share power. Political parties questioned the legality of such church-appointed bodies, claiming that these bodies were not elected and, therefore, lacked legitimacy.

In the summer of 1923, when Sahak II arrived in Aleppo to solve the internal prelacy crises, he was strongly criticized. Henschaks openly accused him of failing to grant voting rights to the refugees in whose name he claimed authority. By doing so, he had created a *refugee and local Armenian* issue.<sup>127</sup> Before WWI, there were about 6,500 Apostolic Armenians in Aleppo; now, there were 27,000. In contrast, the numbers of Catholics and Protestants were much smaller – 9,850 and 900, respectively.<sup>128</sup> This notwithstanding, refugees in Aleppo would not be represented in the national bodies in Syria until 1928.

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<sup>121</sup> Archives of the Catholicosate of Antelias, file 100/2, 520-524, cited in Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 212; see also DNA, Fond “Transfert du Catholicossat de Sis à Antélias,” Sahak II, Kondak, “Khosk Ar Gaghtakan Hays Kilikio,” Damascus, February 28, 1922.

<sup>122</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 194.

<sup>123</sup> Archives of the Catholicosate of Antelias, file 100/3 From Sahak II to Natanian, February 28 1924, cited in in *ibid*, 178-180.

<sup>124</sup> Archives of the Catholicosate of Antelias, file 100/3, 199, 201, From Sahak II to the patriarch of Jerusalem, March 14, 1924, cited in Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 213.

<sup>125</sup> It included Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, Ladovike, Alexandretta, Antioch, Homs, Hama, Zahle, Tripoli, Sayda, Tyr, Nicosia and Larnaka.

<sup>126</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 216

<sup>127</sup> “Kamayakannutunere Halepi Azgayin Gortseru Mej” [Arbitrariness in the National Affairs in Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 16, 1923, 2; Editorial, “Suriayah Gaghuti Kazmakerpman Hartse” [The Organizational Issue of the Armenian Colony in Syria], (b) *Suriakan Mamul*, May 15, 1924, 2.

<sup>128</sup> CADN-SL 575, Services des Renseignements, “Différents organisations existant à l’heure actuelle parmi les Arméniens d’Alep,” Alep, 10 août 1924.



One month later, *Suriakan Mamul* accused Sahak II of not only refusing to have elected national bodies but of appointing incompetent leaders, who required guidance themselves.<sup>129</sup> When, a year later, Sahak II was again in Aleppo to organize local Armenian life, *Suriakan Mamul* contended that the main issue was still the division between the local and refugee Armenians – created by the same religious leaders.<sup>130</sup> As a result, Artavazd Surmeyan was elected as the new prelate of Aleppo,<sup>131</sup> along with a new representative body.<sup>132</sup> As usual, no one was pleased with the elections. *Suriakan Mamul* declared that this time some ARF and Ramkavar representatives managed to be among the elected; therefore, talk of the chaos ceased. Moreover, those who had pretended to fight for the refugees' rights forgot about this once elected and took the same path as the non-refugee Armenians.<sup>133</sup> In the meantime, as the local notables remained reluctant to share their “monopoly over the national affairs” with the refugees, the latter formed their own bodies in parallel, which remained largely illegal. No one could predict when the division would end. *Suriakan Mamul* concluded that it would not end until the refugees managed to leave the camps and erase their “refugee” label.<sup>134</sup> As usual, the solution to this issue came from outside. The citizenship opportunity would not only rescue the refugees from their refugee label but also end the distinction between the refugee and non-refugee Armenians. Citizenship arrived as an ultimate solution to numerous internal issues.

An article in *Suriakan Mamul* was quite telling in this regard: “The distinction between the local and refugee Armenians cannot be tolerated anymore. If the French consider all the Armenians – be they local or refugee – Syrian, why should there be a distinction internally?” The paper urged Sahak II to issue a special order (*kondak*) to correct his previous divisive policy that had created “locals” and “refugees.” Otherwise, it threatened that the newly elected prelate would not be entitled to represent the refugees.<sup>135</sup> In this regard, the local citizenship helped the Armenian refugees establish a sense of commonality within the same ethnic group in the first place. Historian White has argued that state institutions, including citizenship (as well as common education and judiciary systems), could help establish a sense of commonality and

<sup>129</sup> Editorial, “Senankatsats Joghov Me” [A Useless Meeting], *Suriakan Mamul*, Septmeber 27, 1923, 2.

<sup>130</sup> Editorial “Surihay Gaghutin Kazmakerman Hartce,” (b), *Suriakan Mamul*, May 15, 1924, 2.

<sup>131</sup> The vote did not go smoothly among the non-refugee Armenians either. Surmeyan was threatened several times before he could finally arrive in Aleppo at the end of March, 1925. “Halepahayutyen Aghete” [The Tragedy of the Aleppo Armenians], *Suriakan Mamul*, January, 11 1925, 3.

<sup>132</sup> Among the elected were Xachatur Shahen, Mazlumian, Levon Papazian, Grigor Meserlian, Habeb Sufi, Abdallah Fettullah, Soghmon Papazian, Samuel Papikian, Dr. Najarian, Levon Ajemian, “Inch Tesak Entrutyen Me Petk Unink” [What Kind of Elections Do We Need?], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 10, 1924, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Editorial, “Kaykayume Uskits Ke Sksi?” [From Where does the Degradation Start?], *Suriakan Mamul*, September 14, 1924, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Editorial, “Surihay Gaghutin Kazmakerman Hartce,” (c), *Suriakan Mamul*, May 16, 1924, 2.

<sup>135</sup> Editorial, “Arajnordarakan Tagnape” [The Prelacy Crises], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 26, 1924, 2.

integration.<sup>136</sup> Arguably the common citizenship was a step forward in the community-building efforts of the Armenian refugees, since all other national bodies, from political parties to language and religion, only divided them.

Soon, inter-provincial unions were formed by the political parties to contest Sahak II's appointed bodies and divide the power. Gradually these unions came under the control of the ARF. As the church fought to undermine the inter-provincial unions, the political parties and ARF, in particular, supported their preservation. *Pyunik* explained that each union had a role to play, for these bodies were the best situated to liaise with the local government and mandatory authorities, since they were pan-national bodies."<sup>137</sup>

Sahak II was perfectly aware of the political parties' ambitions. However, he was not someone to cede power easily and turned to the French authorities for support. On January 26, 1924, Sahak II sent a letter to the French High Commissioner asking for official recognition as the "supreme leader" of the Armenian community.<sup>138</sup> He justified the need for such an official recognition by the fact that, after the Lausanne Treaty, Armenians were not mere refugees, the prospects of a return to their ancestral land were minimal; hence there was a need to organize the national and religious life. Most importantly, he argued that such recognition would also raise the authority and the prestige of France in the eyes of the Armenians.<sup>139</sup> He hinted that France did not enjoy any trust among the Armenian refugees, especially after the Cilicia crisis;<sup>140</sup> therefore, it needed to recoup it through favorable actions. One such action would be the official recognition of their religious leader.

Weygand reported to Paris, stating that such recognition would also suit French interests. He further explained that the Catholicos had been keen to cooperate closely with the French since political parties and diverse committees continuously challenged and undermined his authority.<sup>141</sup> Weygand's positive response arrived on March 11, 1924.

The official recognition of Sahak II created much enthusiasm among the other Armenian communities. *Hayastani Kochnak* published a series of articles in which Sahak II was raised to the status of the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul in Ottoman times with a call to organize national

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<sup>136</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>137</sup> Sasuni "Goyutyun Iravuniki Hankerge" [The Hymn of the Right to Exist], *Pyunik*, March 30, 1924, 1.

<sup>138</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 219.

<sup>139</sup> "Kilikio Katoghikosutyun Banaktsutyunnere, Katoghikosi Namake Zoravar Weyganin" [The Negotiations of the Catholicos, His to General Weygand], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 20, 1925, 1; see also Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Hereafter, MAE) La Courneuve, vol. 2543, Catholicose arménien de Cilicie à le General Weygand, janvier 26, 1924.

<sup>140</sup> He referred to the French withdrawal from Cilicia.

<sup>141</sup> MAE, vol. 2543, Le haut-Commissariat. en Syrie et au Liban à Monsieur le président du conseil ministre des affaires étrangères, "Établissement en Syrie du Catholicos Arménien de Cilicie," Beyruth 4 février 1924.

life around him.<sup>142</sup> This boosted Sahak II's rank in comparison to the other patriarchs. However, not everyone was enthusiastic. Some felt this was a severe blow to the Armenian collective struggle of the past 30–40 years, which had aimed to establish a political rather than a religious community. Ironically, they had once again been recognized primarily as a religious community.<sup>143</sup>

Sahak II's achievement in installing himself as the only official representative of the Armenian refugees of Syria and Lebanon with the help of the High Commissioner was short-lived. In 1924, the Armenian refugees were granted citizenship and, a year later, voting rights. This meant that the political game was now open to them, and the Armenian political parties would have more room for maneuver.

It is hardly surprising that the existence of so many bodies would cause more division than unity. Soon, everyone started to speak on behalf of the “nation.” Against this backdrop, *Suriakan Mamul* published a sarcastic article depicting the sad reality on the ground. The gist of the article was that Aleppo was the focus of a degree of jealousy, considering the great number of organizations and bodies that were there to care for the refugees and the orphans. It was the place where every single person was a patriot, a nationalist (*hayrenaser eu azgaser*). All the bodies had put their services unconditionally at the service and well-being of the refugees. Everyone was there to fight against any signs of assimilation (*apazgaynacum ev aylaserum*), and the new generation was the center of attention. Anyone would be jealous of this passionate “nation-caring” (*azgasirutyun*), and the legions that were formed to “save the nation.” Sadly, the reality was quite different. Aleppo was the modern “*Arshakavan*,” full of those who worked only for the interests of their small circles by dishonest means and those who were ready to undermine the general interest for their own gain. Nationalism (*hayrensirutyun*), on behalf of which they made daily speeches, was only a cover, a profession that provided them with a job, glory, and bread. There were only a few true ideologists and too many individuals creating divisions.<sup>144</sup> No one seemed interested in unity; each religious or political body was only interested in their small group. Even the compatriotic unions that strived to unite people increased the number of “nations” within the nation, using a “divide and rule” approach. No one seemed concerned that such a policy weakened “the nation.” Anarchy, upheavals, and violation of national interests and constitutional rights were the ground reality. A small minority

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<sup>142</sup> Editorial, “Kilikio Katoghikosakan Atore Surio Mej” [The Cilician Catholicosate in Syria], *Hayastani Kochnak*, May 3, 1924, 547.

<sup>143</sup> “Nor Manramasner Kilikio Katoghikosutyas Pashtonakan Chanachman Shurj” [New Details about the Official Recognition of the Catholicosate of Cilicia], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 10, 1924, 1.

<sup>144</sup> Editorial, “Nor Dareru Arshakavane” [The Modern Arshakavan], (a), *Suriakan Mamul*, October 16, 1924, 2.

had the monopoly to rule with an internal dictatorship without fear or punishment. There was no legal authority, although everyone spoke on behalf of the refugees without ever having received a mandate from them.<sup>145</sup> There was an urgent need to unite under a single authority, preferably a secular one.

### **The political parties and the refugees**

Of all the three political parties, ARF, in particular, had a strong anti-clergy stance. From the very start, it also tried to impose its authority as the only legitimate force, drawing on the fact that the party had held power in the short-lived Republic of Armenia (1918–1920). The party tended to present itself as the defender of the entire Armenian nation.<sup>146</sup> The ARF had been committed to socialism since the party's general congress in 1907 but turned against it after the establishment of Soviet rule in the Armenian Republic. Since then, it nurtured ethnic nationalism and was fervently against Soviet rule.

The ARF was not entirely new to Syria; the existence of a small party cell dated back to pre-war Beirut and Damascus.<sup>147</sup> In 1925, its organ *New Pyunik* publicly celebrated the party's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Syria and Lebanon. In 1916, the cell became a committee whose nucleus comprised the youth from Urfa. A small literary club shielded the committee. According to Sahakian's testimony, not all the members knew what was behind it, and only a few selected individuals met privately to discuss politics.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, it is interesting that during the war, the party organized clandestine meetings using techniques employed by the party many years ago in the Tsarist era.<sup>149</sup> The Armenian communists in Syria and Lebanon later employed these methods during the inter-war period.<sup>150</sup>

After the conclusion of the Lausanne Treaty, all three Armenian political parties had their Congresses to (re) define their strategies according to the new reality. The ARF's 10<sup>th</sup> World congress met in Paris from November 17, 1924, to January 17, 1925, and adopted an

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<sup>145</sup> Editorial, "Nor Dareru Arshakavane," (b), *Suriakan Mamul*, October 17, 1924, 2.

<sup>146</sup> Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 209.

<sup>147</sup> Aram Sahakian, "Damaskosen Apagha" [From Damascus to Apagha], *Hayrenik* (Boston, 1950), N:1, 21–33, N:2, 73–85, N:4, 56–66.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> For example, they staged fake weddings or other family ceremonies as a cover for their meetings Aram Sahakian, "Damaskosen Apagha," N:1, 21–33.

<sup>150</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me Patneshi Vra, Husher ev V kayutyunner* (Beirut, 1988).

official program titled “Guidelines for future activities.”<sup>151</sup> The Congress resolved: “It must be the unequivocal policy of the party... to support by all means those activities the objective of which is the ingathering of the Armenian people in its fatherland or around it... to assist all public organization and efforts that help the reconstruction of Armenia.”<sup>152</sup> It also officially adopted a policy of non-interference in the politics of the countries where Armenian refugees resided.<sup>153</sup> Instead, it decided to concentrate on the education of the new generation by keeping their national spirit alive and creating better employment opportunities for the refugees, who would then not be a burden on the host countries. In the Syrian context specifically, the party declared that the Armenians would have no political goals and that their only wish was to live in total harmony with the locals.<sup>154</sup>

Moreover, this Congress ratified the party's constitution. This stated that both the revolutionary and socialist trends of the party were to be maintained and, therefore, it would defend the Armenian working masses and their interests (such as class, economic, and social political, national, and cultural). It also challenged Soviet Armenia by calling for the re-establishment of an independent and democratic republic that would unite the Armenian territories under Soviet and Turkish domination. To attain these goals, the party called for a number of tasks to be performed by its branches in the diaspora. Most of these tasks were already formulated in the Extraordinary Conference of the ARF Diaspora Executive Bodies, which met in April–May 1923 in Vienna. “Considering that the reconstruction of (Soviet) Armenia and the development of the entire potentialities of (its) Armenian people are the prerequisites to the realization of our basic political aims... all the ARF bodies are instructed to assist in the following tasks: to fervently continue organizational activities both inside and outside Armenia; popularize the idea of “United and Free Armenia” among the masses (in the diaspora); revive, expand and deepen socialist principles among the broad strata of the (diaspora) masses and train them to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate social and national phenomena in accordance with these principles.”<sup>155</sup> Each diasporic community would have its

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<sup>151</sup> The congress elected a new representative body composed of Ruben Ter-Minasian, Simon Vratsian, Arshak Jamalian, Misakian, and Shahan Natalie. The responsible body for Armenia was also preserved to which Sasuni was a member, see in Ashot Nersisyan, *Karo Sasuni* (Yerevan, 2004), 276.

<sup>152</sup> This was to change by the end of 1920s, as ARF's hopes that the Soviet regime would fall vanished. Armenian Revolutionary Federation. *Dsragir* (Program). Ratified by the 10th World Congress (Geneva: 1928), 20. ARF Central Archives. The 10th ARF World Congress. File 1548/29.

<sup>153</sup> CADN-SL 574, Le délégué – Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour le vilayet d'Alep à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire de la R.F. “Activité arménienne,” Alep, 21 janvier 1931.

<sup>154</sup> CADN-SL 573, Note speciale, “La mentalité des partis politique arméniens : Sentiment francophobes du parti “Dachnak,” Parti Tachnagoutoun, historique,” N: 1733, 23 avril 1923, (d'un informateur consciencieux et paraissant très bien placé).

<sup>155</sup> Armenian Revolutionary Federation, *Dsragir* (Program).

central body and take on three main tasks: the creation of close contacts between the homeland and the colonies; the expansion and deepening of Armenian national spirit and national culture in the diaspora; the organization of economic aid and immigration to the homeland (Soviet Armenia).<sup>156</sup>

This policy was formulated and made public by ARF leading figures, who also revealed the party's far-reaching goals:

It is necessary that Armenian communities abroad form a highest organization with its branches, to form regional and local bodies united around a central council and a constitution. A moral state without territoriality, but with national and international justice system, that would be the highest authority of the Armenians abroad in a way like the state with its citizens. On the other hand, Armenians abroad must not become citizens of any country but be isolated and this national organization shall be recognized by the League.<sup>157</sup>

In fact, one could easily draw parallels between this new policy and the former Ottoman *millet* system, where Armenians were spread all over the Empire and were organized based on their belonging to a particular social and religious group (*millet* system) rather than territory. Moreover, the Armenian Central National Council and the constitution – both under the auspices of the patriarch of Istanbul, were in charge of all the national affairs. For another leading ARF figure, Navasardian, the suggested non-territorial belonging meant to “unite everyone who felt they belonged to the same nation.”<sup>158</sup> It remained to be seen what that factor could be, a uniting force that could encourage the diverse refugee groups, who spoke at least three different languages (Turkish, the vast majority; Kurdish and Armenian – the minority, while the local Armenians were mainly Arabic speaking) to feel part of the same nation. While the internal answer was not found overnight, certain external factors helped achieve some unification. The anti-Armenian articles and propaganda placed all of them in a single category, as did the Syrian citizenship. In addition, the enforced displacement of the population created a new framework for the beliefs and behavior of those displaced. While refugees were deprived of membership in a local community, the shared experience of displacement offered them an

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Nikol Aghbalian, *Husaber*, January 22, 1924, cited in Hovik Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk Arenchutyunnere ev Hayrenadardyutyune*, [Homeland-Diaspora Relations and Repatriations] (Yerevan, 1985), 15. It shall be noted, that ARF's idea to form a non-territorial state that could even become a member of the LoN was not that unique. Other groups of refugees had also similar ideas. For example, a Russian refugee, Serge Lewitsky petitioned the LoN with a similar suggestion, see in Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghoshal, Katarzyna Nowak and Alex Dowdall, “Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History,” *Social History*, 46:1 (2021), 70-95, 81.

<sup>158</sup> V. Navasardyan, *Dashnaktcutyan Kaghakan Ughin (10rd Endhanur Joghovi Artiv)* [The Political Road of ARF: For the Occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> General Congress] (Cario: Husaber, 1925), 83, 86-87, 81.

opportunity to access an enlarged national community by asserting national solidarity.<sup>159</sup> This solidarity was also an important way of overcoming their internal diversity.

Henchak, on the other hand, was the most orthodox socialist party.<sup>160</sup> Its youth fraction “Spartak” would become the backbone of the Syrian and Lebanese communist parties, as shown in Part III of this dissertation.<sup>161</sup> The party, in general, saw no serious contradiction “between patriotism and socialism or between nationalism and internationalism.”<sup>162</sup> The insistence on socialism had become a reason for the fragmentation of the party at the turn of the century. The so-called “reformed Henchaks,” who opposed socialism, later merged with the liberal Ramkavars, while the core remained loyal to socialism. Not surprisingly, therefore, when Armenia came under Soviet rule, the party considered its ultimate goals achieved. In 1924, during the party’s Eighth Congress, it was declared “the realization of the goal we have pursued for 38 years committing full support to Soviet Armenia ‘without reservation’.”<sup>163</sup> Not only the party was sympathetic toward Soviet Armenia, but it also applied for membership in the Third International, albeit unsuccessfully.<sup>164</sup> The sympathy, however, was not mutual. The Soviet authorities hated to be reminded that there was another socialist party and retained their arrogant attitude while not losing any opportunity to use the Henchaks as propaganda tools.<sup>165</sup> It is unclear if the Henchaks had any previous cells in Syria. They traditionally dominated in Cilicia.

Henchaks’ third regional deputy meeting took place between 10 and 20 June 1924 in Aleppo, where a new strategy was adopted. For the first time, the party also published its decisions in its organ *Suriakan Mamul* in the autumn. This was a major departure for a revolutionary party. It clearly stated that the party would not cooperate with any forces who were against Soviet Armenia (ARF) and was against any pan-Armenian congress propagated by the ARF. Thus, the party adopted unconditional support for Soviet Armenia, while its attitude toward the local and mandatory authorities was to remain the same – loyal, friendly, and cooperative.<sup>166</sup> The party was especially hostile toward the ARF’s efforts to become the leading force and toward its propagated pan-Armenian congress for a supposedly “United and Integral Armenia with United and Integral Armenians.” Henchaks considered it a dangerous

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<sup>159</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43.

<sup>160</sup> More on this party, see Arsen Kitur, *Patmutyun S. D. Henschak Kusaksutyun, 1887-1962* [A History of the Social Democrat Henschak Party, 1887-1962] (Beirut: Shirak 1962).

<sup>161</sup> More about it see Part III of this dissertation.

<sup>162</sup> Panossian, *From Kings*, 204.

<sup>163</sup> Hratch Dasnabedian, “The Hunchakian Party,” *Armenian Review*, 41:4, 164 (1988), 35.

<sup>164</sup> More on the Third International, see Part III of this dissertation.

<sup>165</sup> Al. Martuni (Myasnikyan), *Kusaksutyunnere Gaghutahayutyun Mej* [Political Parties in the Armenian Colonies Abroad] (Tiflis, 1924).

<sup>166</sup> “S.D. Henschak Kusaksutyun Surio Sherjani Patgamavorakan Joghove” [Henschak Deputy Meeting of the Syrian Region], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 3, 1924, 1.

attempt to form a non-territorial diasporic statehood to compete with Soviet Armenia. For Henschaks, only Soviet Armenia had the right to speak on behalf of all Armenians, including the refugees. Moreover, a united Armenia could only be achieved by:

Taking back our historical lands and not dividing Armenians into two different camps. Real nationalism would have meant merging the different political parties that divide us. Because we must admit that all our political parties as well as churches, instead of uniting, divide us. It is time to unite around Soviet Armenia; it is time to know that we can have a united Armenia if we have a united Armenian people.<sup>167</sup>

In October 1924, the 18<sup>th</sup> Henschaks General Congress took place in Athens, and confirmed the earlier decisions. Soviet Armenia was the realization of the party's goals over the past 38 years. Thus, Henschaks stood unconditionally by the homeland as a "bridge between Soviet Armenia and the refugees abroad" and pledged to fight against any forces that were against Soviet Armenia.

Soon Henschaks declared that the ARF was keen to form National Unions everywhere in Syria in order "to keep the community far from the imaginary ideal of Armenia." *Suriakan Mamul* claimed that the party (ARF) that represented less than 5% of the Armenians in Beirut had started to speak on behalf of *all* the Armenians.<sup>168</sup> *Suriakan Mamul* cautioned its leaders that, after the destruction of the imaginary national home, which was meant to be a semi-bourgeois state to counter Soviet Armenia, the ARF leaders were now thinking to arrange a pan-Armenian congress in the colonies to establish a non-territorial homeland, justifying it with the need to have a national juridical "home" abroad. Henschaks thought the initiative was probably aimed at securing higher positions for unemployed former ministers and controlling all the national bodies as well as the church abroad. This, Henschaks surmised, would also justify the continuous work of their consulates, delegations, and embassies in representing Armenian colonies abroad.<sup>169</sup>

Henschaks called for vigilance and a single national front uniting the forces of the Henschaks and Ramkavars. It said such cooperation was already a reality in Damascus and Beirut, but the same unity was needed everywhere. Soviet Armenian leaders, in their turn, declared that the Armenian cause was over with the establishment of Soviet Armenia and the end of the era of revolutions. The refugee issue was a *humanitarian* matter, not a *political* one,

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<sup>167</sup> "Miatcyal, Amboghjakan Hayastan – Miatcyal, Amboghjakan Hayutyunov" [United Integral Armenia with United Integral Armenians], (a, b), October 2, 3, 1924, 2.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> "Orvan Kargakhose, Hayrenasirakan Mek Jakat" [The Motto of the Day, One Single National Front], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 6, 1924, 1.



and there was no need for political parties among the refugees.<sup>170</sup> Kajaznuni, the first prime minister of the ARF-run First Armenian Republic (1918-1920), had already published his famous Act, “ARF Had Nothing More to Do,” considering the ARF-Soviet confrontation useless and dangerous. It was true that Ottoman Armenian vilayets were not liberated as ARF (as well as Henschak Party) had attempted but at least an Armenian state was established in the Caucasus.<sup>171</sup>

The third party, Ramkavar, was formed in 1921 when several like-minded political parties merged. It was closely associated with the AGBU and, therefore, the National Delegation of Paris. The party controlled AGBU branches everywhere, which were also the main providers of financial support to the Armenian schools. Ironically, the same schools had mostly ARF-affiliated teachers and directors. Occasional clashes, therefore, between the Ramkavars and the ARF members were not uncommon. From time to time, Ramkavars threatened to withdraw their financial support to ensure that the ARF members understood their dependency on the Ramkavars and to show their superiority. Ramkavars also adopted a pro-Soviet Armenia approach, with the adage that “rulers were temporary, (the) Armenian state was not.”<sup>172</sup>

The Ramkavars’ first Deputy Congress was held in Istanbul from 2 to 23 June 1922.<sup>173</sup> It adopted the physical survival of the Armenian people as an absolute priority, while ideology was secondary. Hence, the relations with Soviet Armenia and Moscow had an important place in the party’s political agenda. The party was ready to support the economic development of Soviet Armenia, given that the latter was keen to allow commercial activities there and had a positive attitude toward the Ottoman Armenian cause. In February 1922, Artak Darbinian was sent to Soviet Armenia on a fact-finding mission to prepare for the Lausanne negotiations. Since the London meeting had already vaguely decided on an “Armenian national home” (without specifying the geography), Ramkavars were keen to know if Soviet authorities both in Armenia and Moscow supported this initiative and would agree to have a United Armenia (under the Russian auspices) in case new territories were made available to the Ottoman Armenians.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> “Henchakyan Kusaktutan Anelike” [The Tasks of the Henschaks], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 18, 1925, 1.

<sup>171</sup> Hovhannes Kajaznuni, *H.E. Dashnaksutune Anelik Chuni Ayleves* [The ARF Has Nothing to Do Anymore], (Vienna, 1925).

<sup>172</sup> Karlen Dallakyan, *Ramkavar Azatakan Kusaktutyun Patmutyun (1921-1940)* [The History of the Ramkavar Party, 1921-1940], (Yerevan, 1999), 23-24.

<sup>173</sup> The following members formed the Central administration – V. Tekeyan, A. Terzibashian, G. Papazian, A. Darbinian, H. Yervand, M. Svazlian, L. Guyumjian, M. Rafalian. See in *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>174</sup> Dallakyan, *Ramkavar Azatakan*, 27.

Notably, the ARF had joined the Ramkavars in this initiative, and Darbinian represented both parties in Armenia, an arrangement that was inevitably criticized by the Soviet authorities. The result of this trip was unsatisfactory. It revealed that the Soviet Armenian authorities opposed defending the interests of the Ottoman Armenians. The issue of the Ottoman Armenians, including the fate of the refugees, was entirely secondary for the Soviet authorities in Moscow, the absolute priority being the Soviet-Turkish friendship. Darbinian also reported that, except for certain individuals, the wider circles of the Bolshevik ruling elites were utterly indifferent toward the Armenian refugees.<sup>175</sup> Although the deception was widespread among the Ramkavars too, it was decided to foster good relations with the Soviet authorities and solve the issue of the Ottoman Armenians separately.

After the Lausanne Treaty, the Ramkavars, too, arranged an Extraordinary Congress from January 14 to February 5, 1924, in Paris to decide their further actions. A preparatory session was held in October 1923, where it was preliminarily decided that, in the new circumstances, the organization of the cultural and educational development of the Armenian colonies was a priority to preserve the national customs. The Armenian schools, as well as the families, were the main targets, “where the Armenian teacher and the Armenian women were to be the main partners.”<sup>176</sup> Arshak Chobanian, one of the prominent party members, had already revealed the main political lines of the party in post-Lausanne reality: “to help Caucasian Armenia to strive; help preserve the Armenian language abroad, care for the orphans and settle the refugees.”<sup>177</sup> The Syrian branch also sent its own recommendations to Paris. Their document stated that, due to the large number of refugees, Syria had become one of the “most important sites of activity” (*amenakarevor gortsuneutyán vayr*). The branch also demanded financial help to establish a press organ and send to Syria a “renowned orator fluent in the French language.”<sup>178</sup> The last point referred to the Syrian citizenship opportunity and asked for advice as to whether the refugees should take or decline the local citizenship.<sup>179</sup> Notably, *Yeprat* was launched in Aleppo in 1927, first as an independent paper, then affiliated with the Ramkavars. It remained one of the major Armenian organs printed in Aleppo uninterruptedly during the interwar years and was a valuable source for this dissertation and other studies on the Armenian community of Aleppo.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>177</sup> A. Chobanian “New stage” in *Apaga*, cited in “Haykakan Kyank: Nor Sherjan” [Armenian Life, A New Phase], *Suriakan Mamul*, August 23, 1923, 2.

<sup>178</sup> Dallakyan, *Ramkavar Azatakan*, 77.

<sup>179</sup> Dallakyan, *Ramkavar Azatakan*, 78.

The Congress, in its turn, decided that efforts should be made to create brotherly relations between the Armenian refugees and the local host populations, especially if the latter were Muslims. Considering the fact that a central body was needed to coordinate the refugee issues with the European countries, the Armenian National Delegation (hereafter DNA) was to be retained. At the same time, the Congress decided against the retention of the ARF-led HHA because it not only campaigned against Moscow and Soviet Armenia but risked undertaking more adventures with potentially disastrous consequences for the refugees.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, a whole paragraph was devoted to “us (Armenians) in foreign countries where it was clearly stated that our activities shall primarily be cultural aiming at the preservation of our nation (*azgapanahapan*). We must be cautious about interfering in the domestic politics of the countries that host us, be loyal toward the governments and polite toward the natives.”<sup>181</sup>

These efforts by the Ramkavars qualified them for cooperation with HOK and Soviet Armenia. In fact, the Ramkavar-affiliated AGBU was the only organization allowed to operate in Soviet Armenia. Later, the Ramkavars acknowledged that their target audience was widened due to the Soviet tendency to categorize all the Armenians outside Armenia into two blocs – pro-ARF and anti-ARF.<sup>182</sup> A paradoxical situation was soon created when the Ramkavars were criticized for being pro-Bolshevik because of their pro-Soviet Armenia attitude, at the same time they were not appreciated by the Soviet authorities either. The latter considered them a bourgeois party that would merge with the ARF sooner or later. This notwithstanding, Soviet authorities realized the need to cooperate with the Ramkavars in the colonies that were largely out of their reach. However, this cooperation was not to last. During the third general Deputy meeting in Paris on March 1926 the loss of the support of Communists and HOK was even more obvious. It was acknowledged that the Communists had led an undercover but persistent struggle against the Ramkavars. It was decided that the fight against the ARF was to continue, while cooperation with the Henchaks was to be localized and limited to a case-by-case approach. As for the HOKs, a more prudent policy was needed to avoid becoming a political tool in the hands of the latter.<sup>183</sup>

The emergence of the fourth political ideology – communism – added a new layer to this struggle. The spread of communist propaganda ran in parallel to Soviet Armenia’s increasing interest in claiming influence and authority over the refugees. Bolshevik ideology

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 72-73.

<sup>182</sup> Artak Darbinyan, *Hay Azatagrakan Sharjman Oreren (Husher, 1890-1940)* [Memories from the National Liberation Days, 1890-1940] (Yerevan, 2003), 327.

<sup>183</sup> Dallakyan, *Ramkavar Azatakan*.

appealed to the refugees because it promoted secularism and class interest as a means of integration as opposed to the sectarian, religious, and linguistic attributes advocated by the Syrian nationalists.<sup>184</sup> Ironically, the French delegate in Aleppo concluded that pro-Bolshevik sentiments among the Armenians were a way to express their hatred toward the Muslims.<sup>185</sup> However, in reality, many who were identified as pro-communist were those who expressed sympathy with Soviet Armenia without necessarily endorsing a communist ideology. It is interesting to note that the number of communists even in Soviet Armenia was extremely limited during the 1920s.<sup>186</sup> The creation of the Communist Party in Syria and Lebanon is discussed in Part III of this dissertation in relation to the Syrian Revolt.

This diversity of national bodies ensured permanent turmoil in the camps: violent incidents and fights that quickly escalated into gunfire and reprisals. The passion for politics and the emergence of the nationalist discourses added a new layer of violence: politically motivated shootings, stabbings, and assassinations set off by charges of betrayal and inflammatory political leadership.

Each political party had its own club in Syria and Lebanon, where they organized conferences, public hearings, debates, and other cultural events, and their supporters exchanged views and socialized. These clubs were usually decorated with huge portraits of their founding members or other iconic leaders. The Henschak club was strategically located in front of the Armenian church, where every Sunday, after mass, people would come to attend weekly conferences. The themes of the talks, and the distinguished guests' or speakers' names, were usually published in advance in the *Suriakan Mamul*. The ARF used the same strategy, advertising their speakers in their own paper *Pyunik*. Judging from the themes published in *Suriakan Mamul* during 1922–1926, we can safely say that these Sunday gatherings focused on issues of daily concern: legal status, settlement, repatriation to Armenia, citizenship, and elections first. Only on one or two occasions did the debate run around Marxism.

French authorities held files with detailed background information for each political party as well as a long list of the most prominent members. While none of the parties were “proper parties with a concrete program,” for the French, each was notorious for something. For example, Henschaks were the most “aggressive” in attracting new members. The ARF was

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<sup>184</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern: l'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris, les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997).

<sup>185</sup> CADN-SL 966, Rapport sur l'exode des de chrétien d'Anatolie et de Cilicié en Syrie, 1923, “Situation particulière des refugies d'Alep,” Beyrouth, 14 mars 1923.

<sup>186</sup> In 1921 there were only 3046 communists, in 1924, 4032, in 1927 there were 4766 members and 3436 candidates, see in Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, *The Impact of Soviet Policies in Armenia, 1920-1936: A Study of Planned Cultural Transformation* (Hyperion Press, 1981), 41, 45.

famous for being the party of intellectuals and merchants. Ramkavars were “the most important party with whom the ICRC and NER negotiated directly and transferred funds.”<sup>187</sup> It is interesting that ARF was considered the least dangerous in Damascus, where it had no success among the refugees. According to Tommy Martin, this was due to the fact that the refugees were inclined toward the most extreme (the Henchaks) because of their misery.<sup>188</sup>

More than the parties, it was the Armenian notables who were most carefully monitored by the French authorities for their important intermediary roles. These men were divided into several categories: first, the richest and most influential,<sup>189</sup> second, according to their political views. In the last category, there were three different lists; pro-French, including most of the Catholics and those educated in France; pro-British, including most of the Protestants and those educated in the American-British universities, among whom the most notorious representative was Dr. Altunian; and pro-Faysal, therefore, also pro-British.<sup>190</sup> The French report cautioned that all of these men worked hard to give a political character to their community; nevertheless, their actions remained uncoordinated and highly individualistic. If, after the Cilician crisis, most of the refugees were dispersed, now, thanks to the diverse relief efforts (mostly Protestant), the refugees retained a sense of community. Moreover, during the Cilician evacuation, British propaganda did everything to give political overtones to the American relief efforts and turn the Armenians against the French.<sup>191</sup>

The parties, in reality, had no more than a few hundred followers.<sup>192</sup> Nevertheless, the dominant atmosphere of intolerance and vengeance spread anxiety and skepticism among the entire refugee population, putting them in the spotlight. Moreover, the acts of violence divided the imagined community internally even further, fed by the construction of rival narratives, which their respective press outlets supported, increasingly making the press a political tool. From these local struggles for leadership, the more divisive elements of

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<sup>187</sup> CADN-SL 575, Différents organisations existant à l’heure actuel parmi les arméniens d’Alep, “Les parties politiques – les revendications sociales” (Sources autorité religieuse arméniennes, notables arméniens, agents) Alep, 10 août 1924.

<sup>188</sup> CADN-SL 575, Rapport du Commandant Tommy Martin, Chef du Service des Renseignements de l’Etat de Damas, “Au sujet des Arméniens de cet État,” Damas 8 mars 1924.

<sup>189</sup> The richest men in Aleppo was Mikayel Jenaji, who traded butter with Marash and Deir ez-Zor, he was followed by Nikolay Hindiye, Zeki Sekias and Joseph Gurunil – all of them merchants. On the second list there were Sakkal, Antun Conchakdzi, see in CADN-SL 575, Différents organisations existant à l’heure actuel parmi les arméniens d’Alep, “Répartition par professions et métiers.”

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> French intelligence reports mention different figures, if for 1926 it was estimated 700 members for the Henchaks; 500 for the Ramkavars, and 1000 for the ARF, the figures for 1929 are much lower; 50 members for each Henchak and Ramkavar and 30 for ARF. The real number is, probably, somewhere in between. See in CADN-SL 573, Rapport renseignement, Alep, 5 octobre 1926; CADN-SL 573, Renseignement N. 33, Les parties politiques Arméniennes à Alep, 14 février 1929.

nationalist politics emerged, those encompassing questions of loyalty toward the French and the Syrian hosts, the extent of their political participation, and the search for a “homeland.”

While external actors, by and large, continued to view the Armenians as a homogenous group sharing the same ethnicity and race (regardless of their political views, language, or religion), for the Armenians themselves, ideology prevailed. The citizenship opportunity granted to Armenian refugees in Syria further aggravated these internal divisions since different political parties initially adopted different approaches regarding the citizenship opportunity. Although all the Armenians of Syria and Lebanon would eventually become citizens, the internal rivalry only increased in parallel with their political activism.

### **Inter-Armenian struggle behind the demands of the Aleppo delegation?**

On November 29, 1924, the first-ever celebrations of the Sovietization of Armenia were held publicly in Aleppo – as the “day of salvation for Armenia” by the Henschaks. During this event, it was decided to establish HOK branches in all the major cities of Syria and Lebanon as a pan-Armenian organization, for “love for the motherland could know no political party boundaries.” A successful fundraising campaign was also launched.<sup>193</sup> A few days later, HOK was presented to the student branch of the Henschaks, where an influential Henschak leader, Sargis Tkhruni, made a speech. He stated that HOK’s aim was “to eliminate starvation, fight against illiteracy and reconstruct Armenia.” Then, he targeted the ARF by saying, “ARF must refrain from its deplorable politics... for we have no wish to do politics in Syria, we only wish to bridge the Armenians with Armenia. We would have been the first to leave for Armenia if there was no need to fight against the ARF in the colonies.”<sup>194</sup> Due to this open attack on the ARF, an intensive struggle re-emerged between the two.

The ARF, for its part, decided to take the opportunity to fight its ideological and political opponents with the help of the French. What followed in the ARF organ *Pyunik* was a series of accusations and denunciations naming many Henschaks in Aleppo and Beirut as “communists.”<sup>195</sup> First of all, they declared that “Armenian refugees were the best terrain for the dissemination of Bolshevik propaganda, since they are not satisfied with their

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<sup>193</sup> “Hayastani Noyemberyan Heghapokhutyan 4rd Taredardzi Tonakatarutyune Halepi Mej” [The Celebrations of the Fourth Year of the Sovietization of Armenia in Aleppo], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 3, 1924, 2; “HOK-eru Kazmutyune Suriayah Gaghutneru Mej” [The Formation of the HOK’s in Syria], December 7, 1924, 1; “Hayastani Ognutyun Gortse” [The Aid to Armenia], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 10, 1925, 3; Editorial, “Hayastani Ognutyun arjamea Marmeni Kazmutyan Artiv” [About the Formation of HOK], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 14, 1924, 2.

<sup>194</sup> Editorial, “Verj Petk e Tal Ays Aghetaber Kusaktsutyun” [We Must Finish with This Disastrous Party], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 17, 1924, 2.

<sup>195</sup> Editorial, “Hamaynavorneru Dem” [Against the Communists], *Pyunik*, December 13, 1924, 1.

conditions.”<sup>196</sup> As proof of the Henschaks being under Bolshevik influence they recalled the recent visit of a leading Henschak leader, Sabah Guylian, to Soviet Armenia.<sup>197</sup> They openly invited the French authorities to fight against the communists in Syria and Lebanon and especially “the foreigners, the small grey group of Armenian communists, giving them a good lesson.”<sup>198</sup> The French authorities, always alert against communist activities and suspicious of the Armenian refugees, started to harass the Henschaks immediately, arresting many and expelling two.<sup>199</sup> A few years later, Sargis Tkhruni, one of the leading Henschaks in Aleppo was denounced again, as a result of which he was arrested and exiled on Kadmus Island, while *Suriakan Mamul* was censored and shut down permanently.<sup>200</sup>

Henschaks, on their part, criticized the ARF for their careless publications about the refugees and blamed the ongoing dispossession of the Armenian refugees in Greece on such publications.<sup>201</sup> Henschaks also expressed fear that the same fate threatened the refugees in Syria and Lebanon and called for everything possible to be done to “end the activities of this disastrous party.”<sup>202</sup> The party also demanded that their critics should provide proof that Henschaks were communists and were not loyal to either the local or the French authorities, “We cannot be accused of being Bolsheviks simply because of having close ties with the homeland.”<sup>203</sup>

Another leading ARF member, Artsruni, directly attacked Soviet Armenia, questioning whether it was a *homeland* at all. He declared that the Third International did not recognize any “homelands,” therefore, “today there is no Armenian homeland because it is not free. It cannot freely have any relations with either her neighbors or any other state. Her state budget is drawn in Moscow... The Communist rule cannot last for it is not the free expression of the peoples’ will... while ARF had announced in the very beginning to create *a free Armenia*... an Armenian cannot live without freedom; with this hope, ARF stands by the people to guide them to freedom.”<sup>204</sup> The response of the Soviet Armenian leaders was as radical as these

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<sup>196</sup> Editorial, “Verj Petk e Tal Ays Aghetaber Kusaktsutyun,” *Suriakan Mamul*, December 19, 1924, 2.

<sup>197</sup> Editorial, “Hamaynavorneru Dem,” *Pyunik*, December 13, 1924, 1.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> V. Martuni, “H.Y. D Te Shantajistneri Khembak?” [ARF or a Club of Black-mailers], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 19, 1924, 1.

<sup>200</sup> Tkhruni was later assassinated by ARF members in Beirut in front of his house. Mitra Aghazaryan, *Mihran Aghazaryan* (Yerevan 1983), 16-17.

<sup>201</sup> As explained in Part I of this dissertation.

<sup>202</sup> Editorial, “Verj Petk e Tal ays Aghetaber Kusaktsutyun,” *Suriakan Mamul*, December 19, 1924, 2.

<sup>203</sup> “Hraparakayin Hartsumner Mer Kaghakakan Anazniv Harakorderun” [Publicly Asked Questions To Our Dishonest Political Opponents], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 21, 1924, 2.

<sup>204</sup> Artsruni’s (ARF) speech in the Aleppo Club entitled “ARF and Bolshevism” and pronounced on December 21 is cited in “Nor Lezvagar Men al” [A New Linguist], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 24, 1924, 3.

announcements. Lukashin, the prime minister of Soviet Armenia, declared that now that France had recognized the Soviet Union (on October 24, 1924), it was hoped that the ARF leaders would quickly lose the ground under their feet in France as well as in the countries under the mandate.<sup>205</sup> At this point, the ARF leaders of the former Armenian Republic (HH) delegation still supplied identity cards to the Armenian refugees abroad, a major financial source for the delegation.

It must be said that France was not the only force claiming the Armenian refugees for the Syrian state by granting them citizenship. Soviet Armenia, in its turn, showed increasing interest in these refugees. A mere three months after the citizenship announcement, Yerzenkyan, the head of the HOK and the Minister of Agriculture, announced in Paris that the Soviet Armenian authorities considered having their own representation in all the countries where an important number of refugees lived and that Syria was among them. One of the main tasks was the registration of all the Armenian refugees as citizens of Soviet Armenia. “The issue of the citizenship is one of the most important issues in the colonies.”<sup>206</sup> In addition, the representation was designed to solve two other issues, to facilitate the departure of those refugees who wished to leave for Armenia and dispel the false impression that Armenia was totally subordinate to Russia.

The desire of the Soviet Armenian authorities to extend citizenship to the refugees in foreign lands only intensified the internal power struggle. This policy was fully supported by the Henschaks, who found it appropriate that the refugees should become citizens of Soviet Armenia, who lived abroad temporarily for political and economic reasons.<sup>207</sup>

As rumors began that a Soviet representative was soon to arrive in Syria and Lebanon, ARF leaders rushed to make a deal with the French authorities to prevent refugees in the territories under the mandate being able to apply for Soviet Armenian citizenship. Moreover, it seemed that the French authorities had their own reasons for seeking closer relations with the ARF. Did they seek to undermine or counterbalance the AGBU and Ramkavar, whom they considered dangerous due to their international standing and the fact that many reputable international charities dealt with them without consulting the mandatory authorities or for other reasons? The academic literature still has no answers on this point. Soon, Varandian, a leading ARF figure, was invited along with Tsereteli, the former Georgian leader in exile, to honor Jean

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<sup>205</sup> “Lukashini Haytarautyunere” [Lukashin’s Announcements], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 24, 1924, 4.

<sup>206</sup> Editorial, “Hayastan ev Gaghutnere” [Armenia and the Colonies], *Suriakan Mamul*, December 26, 1924, 2.

<sup>207</sup> M. M. Martuni, “Damaskosi Kyanken” [Life in Damascus], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 21, 1923, 2.



Jaures in Panteon.<sup>208</sup> This was a clear sign that, even after the official recognition of the Soviet Union, the French were reluctant to cut their ties with the ARF-led HHA. The ARF, on their part, used this opportunity to appoint their own representative in Beirut as the main interlocutor before the French High Commissioner. The appointee was Khosrov Tutunjian, chief editor of *Pyunik*, ARF's official organ in Beirut. In reality, Tutunjian was meant to disseminate the High Commissioner's messages relevant to the Armenians in the press. The appointment was, however, presented differently. *Pyunik* declared that Tutunjian was the official representative of the HHA before the High Commissioner.<sup>209</sup> It also started a targeted campaign against Dr. Melkonian, the official representative of the DNA before the High Commissioner, almost immediately. Aggressive articles appeared in *Pyunik* blaming Melkonian for abusing his position and pocketing the money charged for the delivery of identity cards. It was also pointed out that for four to five years of activity, he had been accountable to no one.<sup>210</sup> As a result of this confrontation, *Pyunik* would soon become *Nor Pyunik* after a noisy court case.

Henchak and Ramkavar circles were convinced that the affair described above was not merely a competition to have an "official" representative before the French mandatory authorities and thus, claim authority over the Armenian refugee community. Both *Suriakan Mamul* and *Lebanon* agreed that the upcoming elections in Lebanon also played a significant role in the events.<sup>211</sup> Armenians were allocated two seats for which the ARF already had candidates in mind – Tutunjian and Hovhannisian. On the other hand, Melkonian could easily be identified as the most suitable candidate thanks to his reputation and, thus, presented serious competition for the ARF candidates. Tutunjian, in his turn, had already seized the opportunity to speak "on behalf of the Syrian Armenians" on several occasions. *Suriakan Mamul* noted that there was nothing new in all this. It seemed to be the usual fight for position, as it had always been the case – obtaining posts in the local committees, attempting to control the Catholicosate, and now trying to place their candidate in the Lebanese parliament.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> During these years Paris hosted the greatest number of émigré (400,000), thus forming the "political capital of the refugees" see in Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 2001), 60; "HH Patvirakutyune" [The Delegation of the First Armenian Republic] *Pyunik*, January 3, 1925, 3.

<sup>209</sup> "HH Patviarkutyune Voreve Pashton Che Tvats Sirio Mej: Tutunjian" [No Position is Given to the HH Delegation in Syria: Tutunjian] *Suriakan Mamul*, March 11, 1925, 3; "Tesaktsutyun Fransiakan Hanrapetutyun Surio Bardzr Komiser Zoravar Sarrayi Het" [Meeting with the French High Commissioner, Gneral Sarrail], *Pyunik*, January 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>210</sup> "Bjishk Melkoniani Hashivnere" [The Accoutns of Dr. Melkonian], *Pyunik*, March, 18, April 4, 1925, 1; "Erbemni Dashnakitsneru Gzvertuqe" [The Fight of the Former Allies], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 12, 1925, 1.

<sup>211</sup> "Nshmarner Beirutahay Azagayin Kyanki Vra: Anhatakan Gerakayutyun Krive" [Signs in the National life in Beirut: The Struggle for Individual Dominance], *Suriakan Mamul* April 17, 1925, 1.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

As a result of this fierce power struggle, there were now two lay Armenian “representations” in Beirut – the HHA and the DNA, in addition to the Cilicia Catholicos, the prelacy (religious), and diverse *national* bodies. *Suriakan Mamul* raised an alert that it was yet another step toward the realization of the dangerous “non-territorial homeland” promoted by the ARF. After the recognition of Soviet Armenia, neither DNA nor HHA had the right to exist anymore.<sup>213</sup> Not only there were two “representations,” but even two Armenian Red Crosses – a pro-Soviet one and an ARF-affiliated one.<sup>214</sup> Notably, the Red Cross in Syria was under ARF control, which Soviet Armenian authorities considered illegal, forming their own Soviet-controlled branches in Aleppo as elsewhere.<sup>215</sup> There were even two rival youth associations of the same compatriotic unions, like the one for Urfa: ARF-affiliated and anti-ARF.<sup>216</sup>

The confusion was now even greater. Weygand had recognized Armenians as a religious community. However, with the gradual recognition of other political leaders, it was not clear whether the Armenians were a religious or a political community? Was it possible to have so many leaders and claim unity? Henschaks cautioned that “we cannot have so many heads if we want to be serious, if we do not want to damage our image.”<sup>217</sup> If, before the French recognition of the Soviet Union and thus Soviet Armenia, ARF acted without constraint and propagated its non-territorial homeland in Syria, the situation changed with the official recognition. Consequently, each side – ARF and anti-ARF – became more aggressive in mobilizing different segments of the Armenians to avoid losing ground and continue controlling the refugees. At the end of January 1925, ARF officially declared that the HH delegation was to be preserved and headed by Aleksander Khatisyan (the former prime minister). This was the political situation in Syria when Sarraïl renewed the citizenship offer to the Armenian refugees.

The polarization of the Armenian refugee community in Syria and Lebanon was now complete, split between two opposing blocs – pro-Soviet Armenia (Henschaks, Ramkavars, and communists) and anti-Soviet Armenia (ARF). The internal struggle between these blocs made the refugee community much more visible. Each bloc started to publish articles against the other not only in their own press outlets but increasingly in the Syrian press.<sup>218</sup> These rival

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<sup>213</sup> “Azg ev HH Patvirakutyunner” [The Nation and the HH Delegations], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 11, 1925, 2.

<sup>214</sup> “Zuyg Karmir Khachere Amerikayi Mej” [Two Arm. Red Crosses in the U.S.], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 25, 1925, 4.

<sup>215</sup> “Haykakan Azgayin Karmir Khach” [Armenian National Red Cross], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 18, 1925, 3.

<sup>216</sup> See in Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of the Aleppo’s,” 108.

<sup>217</sup> Editorial, “Surihay Gaghati Kazmakerpume” [The Organization of the Syrian Colony], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 18, 1925, 2.

<sup>218</sup> For example, *L’Echo d’Orient* (Beirut) published an anti-ARF article on February 25, 1925, penned by a certain Kehaïan (not known in the Armenian circles) and entitled “Call to the Armenians” cited in Editorial, “Azgavnas Provokatsione Otar Mamuli Mej” (The Anti-Nation Provocation in the Foreign Press), *Pyunik*, February 28, 1925, 1. ARF did the same.

discussions, coupled with the anti-Armenian discourse, made them much more visible. In fact, it would be impossible to reconcile these opposing blocs since each of them had alliances with different powerful players.

Thus, this internal political turmoil had put the entire refugee community in the spotlight, making their presence much more obvious and giving the impression that they were all dangerous conspirators. Intensified efforts by the Soviets to develop communist cells and establish communist parties in the Middle East played a role, too. In later chapters, I shall argue that this internal struggle was the main reason why the Armenian refugees became much more visible to the Syrians, who became aware that they were present in large numbers and also received the impression that they were dangerous because of the conspiracies, crimes, and unwarranted political activities.

The Aleppo delegation, in our view, made the Syrian citizenship proposition in response to the internal turmoil of the refugee community and the increasing interest of Soviet Armenia and its agencies, such as the HOK, in extending influence over the Armenian refugees of Syria. This thread will reoccur throughout the chapters of this dissertation. Meanwhile, the next chapter aims to reveal the position of the Armenian political parties and wider refugee circles toward the citizenship opportunity.

### **Syrian citizenship and Armenian reactions**

What did citizenship represent in practical terms for the refugees? What kind of status, rights, practices, and performances did it entail? What kind of membership did it mean for the refugees in the Syrian state and the local community? While most studies have engaged with Armenian participation in the local elections, none of them have shown why the refugees accepted citizenship or what they hoped to achieve. While participation in elections is one of the rights that accompanies citizenship, it was not the one most appreciated or needed by most refugees. Instead, citizenship was needed for the most basic entitlement – the unconditional right to remain in the territory without being subjected to state violence or dispossession.<sup>219</sup> In this sense, it corresponds to Hannah Arendt’s depiction of citizenship as “the right to have rights,” in other words, citizenship as the pre-requisite to acquiring rights.<sup>220</sup>

Armenian historian Byuzand Yeghiayan, who later served as the secretary of the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, concluded that “the right (to citizenship) was given to the

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<sup>219</sup> “Lawful access to the territory of a state, not the citizenship per se, is the pre-requisite to the exercise and enjoyment of most rights.” Audrey Macklin, “Who is the Citizen’s Other?,” 335.

<sup>220</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace & Co, 1978), 296.

Armenians naturally. These refugees were as indigenous to Syria and Lebanon as the other ethnicities – Arabs, Assyrians, Greeks, and Kurds.”<sup>221</sup> For Yeghiayan, the ancient presence of the Armenians on historic Syrian land, along with the fact that both Syrians and the Armenians were former Ottoman citizens, entitled Armenians to the same rights as Syrians in Syria.<sup>222</sup> He filled the entire 32 pages to show the *nativeness* of the Armenians to Syria.<sup>223</sup> He also expressed astonishment at how one could be considered a “guest” in his own home?<sup>224</sup> Curiously, he had titled the relevant section in his book “The old rights of the new citizens by Lausanne.”<sup>225</sup>

At the same time, he attributed a greater role in the achievement of these rights to the preservation of the Armenian Ottoman-era constitution (1863) and the Lausanne Treaty, which had maintained the *millet* system, than to the French mandatory authorities, stating, “It is thanks to this constitution that we are not incoming or a guest community as is wrongly repeated by some Armenian press – but one of the indigenous elements of these countries, as we were here even before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Any attempt to undermine this law by the Armenians will endanger the collective existence of our nation...”<sup>226</sup>

We have already seen that granting citizenship to the Armenians was not as natural and uncontested a process as Yeghiayan presented. How was it perceived by the Armenian refugees and their elites? It is also interesting to clarify the position of the political parties. It is noteworthy that Weygand’s first orders did not receive much immediate attention in either the Armenian or Syrian press. The orders of citizenship were published without any further comment in the two local Armenian language newspapers – *Suriakan Mamul*, and *Pyunik*, only a month later.<sup>227</sup>

On the first page of the next edition of *Pyunik*, Yervand Odian, the famous Armenian columnist, who had survived the deportations and now lived in Lebanon, penned an article titled “I am a Lebanese now.” In this article, Odian announced:

I was proud to read the news, as I felt I had thrown away my former dirty clothes and taken new clean ones instead. No more we are *undesired guests* in this country; we are now *locals, citizens*. No one has the right to tell us officially or even unofficially – what

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<sup>221</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 239.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 176-178.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 173-205.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>226</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 240.

<sup>227</sup> “Hpatakutyán Khendri Masin: Hraman Tiv 2825” [On the Issue of the Citizenship: Order N: 2825], *Pyunik*, October 1, 1924, 3; “Tiv 2825 Voroshmágir: Hpatakuytan Hatse” [N:2825 Decision: The Question of the Citizenship] *Suriakan Mamul*, October 3, 1924, 3.

are you doing here? Go to your country! – There is no difference between the locals and us anymore, we enjoy the same civil rights and the same duties.<sup>228</sup>

One would expect to find an enthusiastic and lively discussion in the Armenian press regarding this important event right after the announcement. Yet, surprisingly, neither of the two papers published a single article until February the next year, when the issue was taken up by Sarrail. There are several explanations for this. First of all, while the first Article of the law stated that the former Turkish subjects settled in Great Lebanon and Syria were eligible to apply for local citizenship, the second Article specified that they had two years in which to do so, while the third Article provided an opportunity to choose citizenship in another country where there was shared ethnicity.<sup>229</sup> In the case of the Armenian refugees, one such state did indeed exist, it was Soviet Armenia. Before considering DNA's demand to provide the Armenians with so-called Nansen passports (international passports issued for the Russian refugees), the LoN admitted that Armenian refugees had three options: reconcile with Turkey, become citizens of Armenia, or take local citizenship.<sup>230</sup> Armenian refugees eventually qualified for the international passports, "since in all three cases they had to wait for a long time." The passports would include the following phrase: "*Armenien, ancien ressortissant Ottoman sans autre nationalité.*" In addition, their return to their country of origin was forbidden, making them truly stateless.<sup>231</sup>

Thus, the refugees were not obliged to decide on the issue immediately. Besides, the announcement arrived when the Armenian communities in Syria and Lebanon faced a fierce internal struggle for leadership. In this struggle, the church, three political parties, and the non-refugee Armenian community competed for leadership. In Aleppo, where such struggles were the strongest, citizenship came as the ultimate solution to settle the dispute between the refugee and the local Armenians, as shown earlier.

It was not only the Armenian refugee leaders who did not prioritize the citizenship offer but the refugees themselves who did not rush to benefit from the opportunity. After all, what were the real benefits for the refugees? Two years ago, before the citizenship offer, they were given Syrian identity cards after the first census had been carried out in Syria and Lebanon in

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<sup>228</sup> Ervand Odian, "Libanantsi Em" [I am a Lebanese Now], *Pyunik*, October 4, 1924, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>229</sup> "Tiv 2875 Voroshmagire."

<sup>230</sup> The State Archives of the Republic of Armenia (hereafter, HAA), fond 430, list 1, file 1256, 1-3. Major Johnson, October 5, 1923.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. For more on this, see Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015).

1922.<sup>232</sup> It is interesting to recall the self-identification of the Armenian refugees during the census. At the end of February 1922, Dr. Melkonian appealed to Paris for advice. He explained that the census was well underway and had already created difficulties for the Armenians, for they had to choose between two categories: Syrian/Lebanese or foreigner. Dr. Melkonian enquired what was the best option for the refugees, for both had advantages and disadvantages, especially as the future remained unknown. He further explained that the choice was self-evident and easier for those refugees who had been settled there for several years but more difficult for those who had just arrived. Moreover, “foreigner” meant Ottoman, which was against the instructions of the DNA and the wishes of the refugees.<sup>233</sup> According to Melkonian, Armenians were instructed to insist they should be registered as “Armenians.”

We do not have the census documents to hand and were not able to check how and under which category the Armenian refugees were registered at that time. However, one thing is clear, those refugees who had been in Syria for several years readily identified themselves as “Syrians.” Furthermore, if the category of “Armenian” was missing on the registration documents, it is unclear how Armenians could have registered as such. What is clear, however, is that in the Armenian refugee case in Syria, we can observe the same phenomenon identified by Banko in Palestine; flexibility of identity and thus of nationality. Banko introduced the term “flexible nationality” to indicate the ways in which many Levantine Arabs identified themselves according to the circumstances that suited their interests best and how many switched back and forth until they were no longer allowed to do so by the mandatory authorities.<sup>234</sup> Back then, *Suriakan Mamul* had urged all the Armenians to register with the local authorities and receive identity cards as only the nomads did not have any identity cards.<sup>235</sup> It must be noted that Armenian refugees in the early 1920s had at least five different types of documents.<sup>236</sup>

At this time, in the light of local citizenship, *Suriakan Mamul* bitterly noted that all the national bodies that spoke on behalf of the refugees had done nothing in this regard, nor did

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<sup>232</sup> More on this census, see Stacy Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>233</sup> DNA, folder Melkonian 1921-1923, from Melkonian to Noratunkian, January 24, 1922, 18.

<sup>234</sup> Lauren Banko, “Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under Mandate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 46:2 (2017), 27; Banko in her turn adapts the concept of “flexible nationality” from Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>235</sup> “Inknutyán Tghtere” [Identity cards], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 3, 1922, 1.

<sup>236</sup> First were those who had left Turkey before or during WWI with the Ottoman passes; others had received French and British protégé passports in the immediate Armistice years; yet others had Armenian passports delivered by HHA. There were those who had passes delivered by the new Turkish authorities with the mention of “no return” and finally those who did not have any documents. See in HAA, fond 430, list 1, file 1256, 1-3, Major Johnson, adjoint de haut-commissaire pour les réfugiés, Société de la Nation, Octobre 5, 1923.

they take any action to avoid a repeat of the disastrous events that had occurred in Greece.<sup>237</sup> The editors urged the Armenian elite and diverse national bodies to immediately organize a conference to discuss and decide on the citizenship issue. While certain benefits of citizenship were self-evident, such as a civic duty to participate in the reconstruction of the country and, more importantly, to overcome the “poor status of a refugee” by receiving the same rights and freedoms as the locals during the elections and elsewhere, it was, by no means, enough. A conference was needed to decide whether Syria and Lebanon were suitable sites for a permanent settlement by considering all the aspects – the geography, political and economic conditions, public opinion, and attitudes of the different communities. Moreover, it was important to find out whether, by accepting Syrian citizenship, it was still possible to keep the Armenian national and ethnic particularities. During the conference, thus, the duties and the privileges were to be weighed.<sup>238</sup> In the meantime, the biggest achievement of this new reality ironically was the possibility of finally overcoming the internal division between the refugee and non-refugee Armenians. *Suriakan Mamul* urged the Catholicos to make new elections in which both refugees and non-refugees could participate.<sup>239</sup>

The citizenship issue preoccupied the Armenian refugees and their leaders in both Syria and Lebanon. The debate was especially intensified after the arrival of Sarraïl and his renewed offer. In March and April 1925, the Henchak Sunday lectures<sup>240</sup> in Aleppo were entirely devoted to this theme. Now, instead of the earlier discussions devoted to rent prices and rent laws, famous lawyers, such as Firuz Khanzandian, were invited to speak on wider legal matters.<sup>241</sup> On April 13, Firuz Khanzandian spoke about the “new legal status of the Syrian Armenians.” His view was that, in Syria, Armenians were former Ottoman subjects like the locals; therefore, they had the right to be citizens of these countries according to the Lausanne Treaty. The High Commissioner’s decision did not break any laws, as certain Syrian

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<sup>237</sup> The reference to Greece is about the deportations that were happening there against the Armenian refugees that largely informed the strategies of the Armenain refugees in Syria and will be described briefly later for its importance.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> “Vehapar Katoghikosi ev Gavarakani Ushadrutyanyan” [To the Attention of the Catholicos and the Provincial Body], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 18, 1925, 2.

<sup>240</sup> This audience took place every Sunday, Sargis Tkhruni, a prominent Henchak member was the most frequent speaker. The themes varied, usually the discussion topics were current issues that occupied the community for example the national affairs, conditions in the camp, the new legal status, prospects of the elections and its consequences, but also the conditions in the Soviet Armenia, fight against ARF, sometimes also ideological and philosophic themes – Marxism.

<sup>241</sup> “Haykakan Lesaran: Suriahayeru Hpatakutyanyan Hartse” [Armenian Audience: The Citizenship Issue of the Syrian Armenians], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 25, 1925, 3; “Haykakan Lesaran: Vardzakalutyanyan Khndire” [The issue of the rents], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 15, 1925, 2; “Haykakan Lesaran: Suriahay Gaghtakanutyanyan Irvakan Katsutyune” [The Legal Status of the Syrian Armenians], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 10, 1925, 2.

newspapers claimed. Moreover, the noise was over after Sarraïl had made Lausanne Treaty provisions public. What was to be the position of the Armenians regarding citizenship? He encouraged everyone to register as soon as possible. The Armenians' concern that if they accepted local citizenship, they would be forced to *remain there forever* did not correspond to reality. Any citizen of any country could *leave anytime* and take another one [citizenship]...<sup>242</sup>

At the end of March 1925, Surmeyan, the newly elected prelate, finally arrived in Aleppo. *Suriakan Mamul* hoped that all the pending issues in the community would soon be tackled one by one. These included the accurate census, establishing ties with the Alexandretta Sanjak, Antioch, and Kessab, improving the schools, fighting against the internal division of the 35–40 compatriotic unions, tackling the issue of the camps, and, of course, the most important and urgent matter of all, citizenship, which was a “vital issue.”<sup>243</sup> Although, given the short timeframe, it would be impossible to organize a public discussion, let alone a conference.

The ARF, on the other hand, largely continued its initial strategy unchanged during the period between the two citizenship announcements (August 1924–January 1925). However, instead of giving up its plans to organize a pan-Armenian congress, it intensified its efforts on this project.<sup>244</sup> During the summer of 1923 (prior to the announcement of citizenship), Syria and Lebanon received visits from high-ranking ARF officials, among them the former Armenian prime minister, Hamo Ohanjanyan. He arranged a public conference in Beirut on June 6, 1923. During this meeting, Ohanjanyan declared that the current rulers of Armenia were *foreigners*, appointed from Moscow, and that Soviet Armenia could not be considered a *homeland*.<sup>245</sup> *Suriakan Mamul* warned its readers that such visits were aimed at involving the refugees in politics, while “politics was the last thing to interest the poor refugees, who struggled to gain their daily bread and were in such a precarious state because of politics.”<sup>246</sup> The editors also warned against dividing the refugees into two opposing camps – those who supported Soviet Armenia and those who did not. For a long time, the ARF leaders tried to persuade the other political bodies to have a pan-Armenian Congress since 700,000 Armenians lived in Soviet Armenia, and an equal number was spread worldwide. The Congress was to

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<sup>242</sup>“Haykakan Isaran: Suriahay Gaghtakanutyun Iravakan Nor Katsutyune” [Armenian Audience: The New Legal Status of Syrian Armenians], *Suriakan Mamul*, April 17, 1925, 2. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>243</sup> Editorial, “Halepahay Temi Nerkin Keanke” [The Internal Life of the Aleppo Prelacy], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 25, 1925, 2.

<sup>244</sup> Editorial, “Dardzyal Hamagaghutayine” [The Pan-Armenian Again], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 17, 1924, 2.

<sup>245</sup> Editorial, “Hakapetakan Khachelutyune” [The Anti-State Crusification], *Suriakan Mamul*, July 1, 1923, 1, see also July 5, 8, 1923.

<sup>246</sup> Editorial, “Hakapetakan Khachelutyune,” *Suriakan Mamul*, July 8, 1923, 1.



discuss the pending issues such as the future of the orphans and the legal status of the refugees – were they to remain “guests,” take local citizenship, or repatriate?<sup>247</sup>

A few months later, the ARF called for work on a new national constitution to ensure the cultural autonomy of the refugees based on secular rather than religious attributes.<sup>248</sup> The process needed to start with the local branches of the national bodies. The ARF representatives had highlighted the importance of creating such a pan-Armenian body to keep the refugees far from the imaginary Armenia, to forbid them from taking local citizenship but instead form a non-territorial state.<sup>249</sup> *Suriakan Mamul* reported this news, adding that the “party which represented 5% of the Armenians in Beirut, has already started to speak on behalf of all the Armenians.”<sup>250</sup> In the end, the much-desired Congress did not materialize. ARF, nevertheless, did not give up the idea of creating a “Central Diasporic Body.” Its high-ranking officials continued to tour the main cities of Syria and Lebanon, promoting this idea. The concept was also advocated by Nikol Aghbalian, the former minister of education in the First Armenian Republic, who arrived in mid-September 1923.<sup>251</sup> He visited Damascus, Aleppo, Zahle, and Beirut, where he made speeches before a selected audience. In Damascus, he had reportedly declared that Armenia was too small to contain all the refugees, nor did it have any industry or enough cultivable lands. Moreover, it was imprisoned among the other Soviet federations. Thus, there was an urgent need for the colonies to organize themselves under a single administration. By doing so, they would oblige the LoN to open a special fund with contributions from the member states for the creation of a central body, a kind of Armenian diasporic state to stand against Soviet Armenia.<sup>252</sup> Ironically, as these declarations were being made, the ARF-controlled Armenian Red Cross branches in the USA and Egypt collected money to transfer 10,000 refugees to Yerevan. What was incomprehensible, however, was the aim of the fundraising since, during the entire campaign, high-ranking ARF officials told the audience how unsafe Armenia was because it would soon be conquered by Turkey, as, for example, was declared by Vratsyan, the last prime minister of the Armenian Republic during his visit in the Balkans.<sup>253</sup> *Suriakan Mamul* wondered with astonishment, was ARF, “which

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<sup>247</sup> “Hamagaghutayin Hamagumar Me Stipoghakan E” [The Pan-Armenian Congress is a Must] *Pyunik*, March 23, 1924, 1.

<sup>248</sup> “Anmijakan Partke” [The Direct Duty], *Pyunik*, June 11, 1924, 1.

<sup>249</sup> “Qaose” [The Choas], *Suriakan Mamul*, February 21, 1924, 1.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> S. Slak, “Nikol Aghbalian Damaskosi Mej: Atorazurk Nakhararnere Ke Tamarin” [Nikol Aghbalian in Damascus: The Ministers without Chairs Wander], *Suriakan Mamul*, Septmeber 16, 1924, 1.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*; Editorial, “Taparakanneru Vorme” [The Swarms of the Wanderers] (a), *Suriakan Mamul*, Septmeber 23, 1924, 2; Editorial, “Taparakanneru vorme (b), *Suriakan Mamul*, Septmeber 25, 1924, 2.

<sup>253</sup> Edit., “Hanganakutyunner Hayastani Anunov” [Fundraising for Armenia], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 22, 1924, 2.

had two members and three opinions” with or against Soviet Armenia? Was it oriented to the East or the West?<sup>254</sup> Often, the declarations of the ARF leaders were indeed contradictory.

Finally, when a misfortune happened in Armenia in October 1924 in the form of a powerful earthquake in Leninakan (today Gyumri), Soviet authorities publicly refused to take any financial support from the ARF.<sup>255</sup> For the ARF, it was slowly becoming clear that all their efforts to organize either a pan-Armenian Congress or any diasporic body were doomed to failure. It needed a new, powerful partner and a new form to succeed. A solution arrived unexpectedly in the form of the citizenship announcement, and ARF quickly grasped this opportunity to fulfill its aspirations to be a leading force in the community.

The ARF and its supporters had advocated Syrian citizenship from the start. *Pyunik* announced that, with this new status, Armenians would throw away their refugee label and become equal citizens:

Our fears that it (citizenship) is against our *national cause* are not justified. Refugees are spread everywhere, unprotected and helpless... Our cause is not to fight for our refugee status... by accepting the local citizenship we do not deny either our cause or our *nationality*. *An Armenian remains always an Armenian* and can always return to his homeland. *Syrian citizenship keeps an Armenian – Armenian, and an Arab – Arab.*<sup>256</sup>

For the ARF, the advantages offered by this new opportunity were numerous: besides erasing the refugee label, Armenians would be able to participate in the state administration and parliament, defend their rights in the courts like any other citizen, enjoy French protection there and abroad; in addition, the issue of the lost properties would gain new importance. Finally, Armenians would receive the same financial and moral support as other religious and ethnic communities in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>257</sup> In order to put pressure on the refugees to register for citizenship, ARF tied it to the anti-Armenian discourse. *Pyunik* recalled how all the delegations that had met Sarrail had demanded that the number of Armenians should be reduced or that they should be removed. It stated that, although such sentiment was not religious nor political, but primarily economic, nevertheless all of them had highlighted the non-Syrian, non-Lebanese status of the refugees. By accepting local citizenship, this distinction, along with the anti-Armenian discourse, would end immediately; therefore, the sooner it happened, the better. There was no need to wait for two more years. France was the only country under whose

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<sup>254</sup> “Mahamerdz Kusaktsutyun Me Kaghakan Kharkhapunnere” [The Political Disturbances of the Dying Political Party], (b), *Suriakan Mamul*, October 17, 1924, 1.

<sup>255</sup> *Khorherdayin Hayastan* (Yerevan) September 13, cited in “Hayastane Ke Merje Dashnaktsutyun Ognutyune” [Armenia Rejected ARF’s Financial Support], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 17, 1924, 4.

<sup>256</sup> “Hayere ev Suria” [Armenians and Syria], *Pyunik*, January 24, 1925, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

protection “we shall have no fears to be expelled; thus we shall benefit from this opportunity.” It will be in “our own interests,” as well as in the interests of the Syrians and the Lebanese, and the mandatory power for whom “Armenians present excellent tools of influence.”<sup>258</sup> This is how *Pyunik* saw the citizenship opportunity.

In Beirut, as expected, the new star was the chief editor of *Pyunik*, Khosrov Tutunjian, who toured the camps with an important lecture dedicated to the legal status of the Armenian refugees. He, of course, urged everyone not to miss this opportunity and immediately register for citizenship, recalling the disastrous events in Greece, which was supposedly a friendly country. Just a few months ago, Aghbalian had toured the colonies advocating a non-territorial supreme body; now, Tutunjian was doing the same with a similar passion but a different message. He clearly had a mission to convince the Armenians to take citizenship.

The critical issue for the refugees was, of course, their abandoned properties. It seemed many refugees believed they had a better chance to recover their properties if they preserved their Ottoman citizenship rather than taking a different one. Diverse Armenian bodies approached Child, the League representative in Athens, urging him to press the League to take a binding decision regarding restoration of their rights to their abandoned properties or a right to compensation, even if the refugees took another citizenship. It is interesting to note that Child saw the solution to the problem in Turkey’s membership of the League.<sup>259</sup>

It must be said that Tutunjian had no illusions about compensation for the abandoned Armenian properties; neither did he think Armenian refugees would be ever allowed to return to Turkey. In one of his public lectures, he announced that it was naïve to think that a “national home” would be given to the Armenians one day. It was also wrong to believe that, one day, refugees would be compensated for their lost properties. On the other hand, Kemalist Turkey strived to assimilate all the minorities (Kurds, Assyrians, Circassians), so why did (the stupid) Armenians still desire to return? The only hope was to return one day to Armenia (Soviet), but no one knew when.<sup>260</sup> Since no state wished to have minorities (not even Greece) and there were no concrete plans for settlement in Armenia, it remained for the refugees to clean the “dirty label of a refugee from their foreheads” as soon as possible by accepting with gratitude the High Commissioner’s decree.<sup>261</sup> A few days later, Tutunjian gave a similar speech in the biggest refugee camp in Beirut, where he repeated that the current citizenship opportunity was

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<sup>258</sup> “Petk e Ardzanagrivil” [We Need to Register], *Pyunik*, January 31, 1925, 1.

<sup>259</sup> “Turkia Toghnavats Kalvatsneru Khendire” [The Issue of the Armenian Properties Left in Turkey], *Suriakan Mamul*, March 29, 1925, 4.

<sup>260</sup> “Hraparakayin Banakhosutyun Juniyei Mej” [A Public Lecture in Junieye], *Pyunik*, February 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

the only solution for the refugees, who were otherwise not allowed to settle down anywhere. Therefore, first of all, it was in the Armenian interests. He also called on the reluctant Henschak and Bolshevik circles to consider the situation in Greece.<sup>262</sup> Notably, a reference to Greece was made each time. We shall briefly describe the events in Greece below because of their importance in informing the decisions and strategies of the Armenian refugees in Syria.

From Tutunjian's warnings to the Henschaks and Bolsheviks, it becomes apparent these circles had advocated against citizenship: "It has been repeated many times, that by accepting the local citizenship we (Armenians) continue to remain Armenians. Instead, we obtain the powerful protection of the French and will not have the same destiny as the refugees in Greece." Those who claimed that, by taking local citizenship, the refugees would lose their right to be repatriated to Armenia and those who campaigned against local citizenship on behalf of Soviet Armenia were traitors. "It is our dream to go to Armenia, but until that time, we will be able to survive."<sup>263</sup> Notably, it was said that certain Armenians toured Syria and Lebanon, advising consultation with the Soviet Armenian authorities before any decision was made.<sup>264</sup>

The danger of punishment for those who were late with their registration was repeated over and over. Tellingly, the pages of *Pyunik* soon carried an ultimatum from the Chief of Police of Greater Lebanon, who threatened severe punishments to anyone late with registration.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, as the deadline for the registration approached (April 1925), *Pyunik* started encouraging the Armenians to participate actively in the upcoming elections. The ultimate goal of the Armenians was not to have a seat in the parliament but to initiate cooperation with the locals. Their participation would bring many advantages: it would facilitate closer relations with the Arabs instead of the current isolation in the camps, instill confidence in the Arabs to dissipate the wrong opinion that they had about the refugees, and prove to the locals that the Armenians were loyal citizens.<sup>266</sup>

From Tutunjian's speeches, it was clear that the ARF had an agreement with the French authorities to convince the refugees to take local citizenship. At the same time, efforts were being made to keep the registration process as low profile as possible. For the time being, it was all about Lebanon, and there was no word about Syria. After all, there were no planned elections in Syria and no need to rush.

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<sup>262</sup> Sarian, "Hraparakayin Banakhosutyun" [Public Lecture], *Pyunik*, March 4, 1925, 3.

<sup>263</sup> "Zguysh Kharnakichneren" [Careful from Mischievous People], *Pyunik*, March 14, 1925, 1.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Arif Vostikanapet, "Pashtonakan Haytararutyun" Arif, Chief of Police, [Statement], *Pyunik*, Mar. 14, 1925, 1.

<sup>266</sup> "Nerkayatchutchakan Khorhurde" [The Representative Council] *Pyunik* April 18, 1925, 1.

From these discussions and the reluctance of the Armenian leaders, it becomes clear how unprepared the Armenian refugee community was for such a radical change in their legal status with unclear consequences. There was no time for any internal discussions on the matter. Moreover, the pressure and extraordinary speed of implementation made the refugees suspect that the new legal status was to serve a hidden purpose that was not necessarily in their best interests.

This notwithstanding, the citizenship opportunity also had an immediate positive impact on the Armenians. It came as a solution to the distinction between refugee and non-refugee Armenians and helped settle the internal power struggle in Beirut. On February 18, 1925, all the Armenian notables and heads of diverse national bodies of Beirut were summoned to an important meeting. Two urgent issues were the main discussion topic – local citizenship and forming a capable national body “to solve all the issues in the best interest of our people.” Both matters were debated for hours. It was decided to accept local citizenship, which served the Armenian interests, and facilitate the refugees’ registration. It was also decided to elect a *temporary national body* to act in cooperation with the Catholicos. This group of five members was elected immediately and comprised Dr. Tutunjian, Vardapetian, Kenjian, Hazarapetian, and Damadian.<sup>267</sup> The new body, headed by famous ARF figures, was praised in the pages of *Pyunik*, as a “trustworthy, united front before the French and the local authorities, that would soon instill confidence and make foreigners respect our community.”<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> “Azgayin Jamanakavor Marmin” [A National Temporary Body], *Pyunik*, February 21, 1925, 3.

<sup>268</sup> “Azgayin Jamanakavor Marmine” [The National Temporary Body], *Pyunik*, March 4, 1925, 1.



Hagop Derounian's Lebanese identity paper, bearing the date 1925.

Figure 9. The identity card given to Hagob Derounian. Source: *Houshamdayan*.

One month later, Sahak II organized elections for the Armenian Provincial Council. On March 13, 188 persons, comprising refugees and local Armenians, were invited to St Neshan Armenian church to elect their representatives.<sup>269</sup> This was the first time refugees were allowed to participate in the *national* elections in Beirut. In Syria, they had to wait until 1928 for such a right.

It is noteworthy that, although the Armenian refugees were in the spotlight in both the Syrian and Lebanese press regarding their new legal status, the strategies put forward by the Armenian elite in Syria were not related to the situations in Syria or Lebanon. In my earlier research, I have wrongly attributed some of the elite refugee discourse to be the response to the ongoing Syrian anti-Armenian rhetoric.<sup>270</sup> In fact, careful and systematic reading of the Armenian press, as well as constant references to “the events in Greece” reveal that the discourse was instead a response to a major anti-Armenian campaign happening elsewhere, in Greece. If, in the beginning, many Armenian circles pressed for a conference to discuss the

<sup>269</sup> 137 persons voted for Tagvur Palajian, Khosrov Tutunjian, Karapet Katsakhtian, Kirakos Afalean, Mihran Damadian, Nshan Hazarapetian, Vahan Vardapetian who, in their turn, met on March 19, 1925 and elected the administrative body headed by Mihran Damatian, Vardapetian and Hazarapetian, “Vehapar Katoghikosi Shraberkane Hay Azgayin Khorherdi Masin: Pashotnakan” [The Official Announcement of Sahak II on the National Council], *Pyunik* April 4, 1925, 1.

<sup>270</sup> Victoria Abrahamyan, “Citizen Strangers: Identity Labelling and Discourse in the French Mandatory Syria, 1920-1932,” in *Journal of Migration History*, 6:1, 40-61 (Leiden, 2020).

advantages and disadvantages of the new legal status on offer, the same circles quickly decided in favor of a speedy acquisition of citizenship in the light of the deportations from Greece. An article in *Suriakan Mamul* was quite revealing in this regard:

Everyone would say that Armenians enjoy the local hospitality (in Syria), and there is no reason it will not last. Yet, we have the example of Greece, where thousands of Armenians were received warmly and were provided with food, housing, agricultural tools, and even lands... Yet, it was short-lived... How to explain this change? In these selfish days, no one wishes “to see a foreigner at his home.” We must seriously consider all the possibilities that may arise in Syria because of our current condition. We must not forget that the hospitality found in Syria has no grounds. Greece hosted and supported us because we shared the same fate, and elsewhere an Armenian had helped a Greek too. The same is not true for the Syrians for whom we remain foreign. In Syria, we were hosted by the kindness of the French authorities and the local Arab people. This “kindness” is a very fragile ground; we must understand for once and forever that in politics, there are no emotions... What kind of guarantees do we have that the hospitality we enjoy shall last? – None! What are we doing now to make it last? Nothing! Until when shall we continue to live in the camps... tomorrow may be too late. The future is full of surprises.<sup>271</sup>

Opting for local citizenship was not the only strategy the Armenian refugees in Syria adopted to avoid the fate of the Greece refugees; other actions were campaigns against begging, alcoholism, and gambling, as well as improving conditions in the camps. All the religious and compatriotic unions were tasked with ensuring that no one from their respective communities was begging, especially on Sundays. Armenians had already earned a good reputation for being entrepreneurial, hardworking, and honorable, and no one was permitted to undermine this reputation.<sup>272</sup> Years later, the Armenian historian Yeghayan would proudly note that there were 111,250 Armenians in Syria and, while 80 percent were destitute, no one was seen in the streets begging.<sup>273</sup>

The former Armenian legionnaires, on their part, committed to becoming the “moral army of our homeland,” fighting against the moral evils that plagued the refugee camps. In one of their meetings, they decided to facilitate the relations between the homeland (Soviet Armenia) and the refugees by organizing weekly meetings and preaching to the youth. They declared, “We must refrain from the ideas of another homeland or (national) home since a handful of people cannot have more than one homeland.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> S. Syuni, “Minchev Erb?” [Until When?] (a), *Suriakan Mamul*, October 19, 1924, 1.

<sup>272</sup> Editorial, “Orvan Kargakhose: Paykar Muratskanutyany Dem” [The Motto of the Day: Fight Against Begging], *Suriakan Mamul*, October 19, 1924, 2.

<sup>273</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 248.

<sup>274</sup> Tatian, “Lsaram: Hay Legionakanneru” [Armenian Legionnaires], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 3, 1924, 1-2.

Increasingly, demands for improvement of the conditions in the refugee camps changed to calls for leaving the camps and settling among the host societies. Not only do most of the articles in the local press about the refugees focus on the camps, but the camps had become the main reason for being isolated from the locals. This isolation, on its part, had created many misperceptions about the refugees. However, this isolation was a double-edged sword – if it was negative in terms of establishing relations with the locals, it was positive for preserving their national identity. An article in *Yeprat* was quite explicit: “Although people live in poverty (in the camps), nevertheless they have their national feelings, they like to attend church, they have a school, and they remember every day that they are Armenians and must stay Armenians.”<sup>275</sup> However, by calling on the refugees to leave the camps and accept local citizenship, the Armenian leaders promoted a certain degree of acculturation, adapting to the local culture, while retaining aspects of their original culture.<sup>276</sup>

The year 1924 was pivotal for all the Armenian refugees: it was when the Lausanne Treaty entered into force and when all the Armenian political parties had their congresses to define their strategies for the post-Lausanne reality. It was the year when immigration limitations were imposed in the USA, and the immigration of the refugees was halted and limited, and it was when other countries hosting a large number of refugees from Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece took measures to get rid of their Armenian refugee populations. In the case of Greece, the measures taken were radical. It was also when the French authorities concretized their refugee policies in Syria by offering citizenship to the Armenian refugees. Finally, 1924 was the year in which Moscow intensified its efforts to spread communist propaganda in the Middle East and laid its claims over the Armenian refugees. Soviet Armenia (and thus, USSR) would soon become an important player in Syria and Lebanon, where the largest Armenian refugee population outside the USSR resided. In the next chapter, we attempt to present how the Armenian refugees who had become citizens participated in the local elections.

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<sup>275</sup> Editorial, “Kemberu Shurj” [About the Camps], *Yeprat*, August 30, 1930, 1.

<sup>276</sup> John Berry “Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation,” *Applied Psychology*, vol. 46:1 (1997), 5-34; For discussions about integration and host society responses in the post-WWII see Jan C. Jansen and Simone Lässig, ed., *Refugee Crises, 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). The most recent scholarship on refugee host societies and integration has acknowledged the absence of any agreement about what exactly constitutes successful integration, see Jenny Phillimore, “Refugee-Integration-Opportunity Structures: Shifting the Focus from Refugees to Context,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 34:2 (2020).



### **Chapter III: Being Armenian – Becoming Syrian**

This chapter discusses the participation of the Armenian refugees in the elections in Aleppo in 1926, the nationwide elections of 1928, and the Syrian attitude. It presents the political scene in both cases, showing why and how anti-refugee discourses were developed and how refugees managed to mitigate them each time. It will also situate the anti-refugee discourses in the wider political situation in Syria, which would help us contextualize both the discourse of the Syrians and the refugee counter-arguments.

#### **The Aleppo elections 1926**

While the acquisition of local Syrian citizenship undoubtedly helped overcome the internal distinction between refugee and non-refugee Armenians, it did little to rescue them from their “refugee” label, as had been hoped. Nor did it turn the Armenians into full-fledged citizens overnight. Although the Armenian refugees were given the right to participate in the local elections in Syria and Lebanon, thereby performing their newly acquired citizen duties, the distinction between them and the locals was being drawn more clearly by the local press. If Armenian participation in the legislative elections of Lebanon in the summer of 1925 was low-profile, given the agreement of the French and the Maronite elite, this was not the case in Syria. One of the main reasons why the situation looked different in Syria was the eruption of a major uprising in August 1925 in Jabal al-Druze, which quickly became a nationwide uprising against the French mandate. This episode and the Armenian participation in it are studied in Part III of this dissertation. It was only natural that the new citizens’ participation in the elections, which were organized in the middle of this major political upheaval, was regarded suspiciously by the Syrian nationalists. In this context, the French authorities organized the first legislative elections in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Alawite State in January 1926. Nationwide elections were organized in 1928 in the aftermath of the Revolt.

On December 10, 1925, merely a week after boarding the boat to Syria, the newly appointed French High Commissioner, de Jouvenel, was in Aleppo. It was one of the first places he visited, a place untouched by the turbulence that plagued the rest of Syria. In the evening, a dinner was organized in his honor at the historic Baron Hotel, to which all the notables of the town of all religious communities were invited. The dinner opened with a discourse by Subhi Barakat, who mentioned how emotional it had been for the Alepines to learn that the High Commissioner had wished to honor their city first. He then explained that Alepines had always cooperated closely with the French delegates to maintain peace and order in their city and had

nothing to do with the troubles elsewhere (referring to the Revolt). The main preoccupation of the Alepines was the economy since their city “has a great commercial, economic, industrial importance” in a region renowned for its agriculture and fertility, which has nevertheless been in decline for a few years now. Finally, Barakat expressed hopes that the High Commissioner would give great importance to the wishes of the Alepines to form their own state... According to him, Aleppo was shortly to become an exemplary modern city, which could already boast of its schools, hospitals, running water, electricity, trams, and other important public works...<sup>277</sup> Thus, the Vali renewed the claim of the Alepines for independence from Damascus, which was nothing new and dated back at least to Faysal’s era.<sup>278</sup> De Jouvenel first tried to downgrade the Vali’s claims that Aleppo was the only city where there was peace, by claiming that Lebanon, Alawite State, Homs, and Hama, Tripoli, Antioch, and Alexandretta were all peaceful, with the only exceptions were Damascus and Jabal al-Druze. He then went on to confirm the economic importance of Aleppo due to its geographic location “in the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia” and the French commitment to make Alepines benefit from that “exceptional situation.”<sup>279</sup> He concluded with his famous announcement that “France is keen to give but not to cede, and she gives everyone according to their merit – ‘la guerre aux rebelles, la liberté aux hommes pacifiques’ (war to the rebels and liberty to the peaceful people).”<sup>280</sup> Yet, by the end of 1926, especially after the hastily organized elections and the ensuing violence, de Jouvenel would understand just months later that he had misinterpreted the autonomist aspirations of the Alepines. Aleppo demanded autonomy, which was, however, chiefly about financial autonomy from Damascus, and did not mean that the Alepines were entirely untouched by the Syrian national inspirations.<sup>281</sup>

De Jouvenel put forward his own action plan for Syria, which was published in *Journal de Genève*, probably to make it more accessible to the LoN. His first priority was the establishment of peace and order everywhere. The second was liberal governance in compliance with the first article of the mandate, such as conducting elections and drafting the organic law (constitution), which would prove the ability of the Syrians to self-govern. It remained for the Arabs to know how to profit from the extensive public freedoms offered them. Thirdly, it was the revival of the economy, for which the High Commissioner was to undertake important

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<sup>277</sup> “M. de Jouvenel à Alep” [Mr. Jouvenel in Aleppo], *Le Reveil*, Beyrouth, December 14, 1925, 1, cited in MAE, vol 50/196, #86.

<sup>278</sup> More on this see Joel Veldkamp, “The politics of Aleppo’s,” chapter 6 “Autonomy.”

<sup>279</sup> “M. de Jouvenel à Alep.”

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 102, 26 decembre 1925, Jouvenel à Monsieur le Préfet.

steps.<sup>282</sup> By that time, most Syrian demands were unchanged and included unity of Syria, elections for an Assembly by universal suffrage, and replacement of the military High Commissioner with a civilian one.<sup>283</sup> Thus, with the announcement of the French liberal policies most of the demands were to be met.

In December 1925, hastily organized elections were to be held in all the parts of Syria untouched by the Revolt, which included the vilayets of Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, and Alexandretta, but not Damascus, Hawuran, and Jabal Al-Druze. The elected delegates were, then, to decide what kind of relations their vilayets wished to have with the unified Syrian state. It is noteworthy that, only in the middle of the Revolt did the French High Commissioner remember that the mandate system foresaw the development of a Constitution, for which the deadline was due to expire in September 1926. This was why one of the first actions of the newly appointed High Commissioner de Jouvenel was to task the recently elected Council in Lebanon with drafting a constitution. The situation was different in the rest of Syria, where new Representative Councils needed to be elected first.<sup>284</sup> There was also an urgent need to form a provisional government since Barakat had resigned on December 20, 1925, in the face of widespread opposition against his rule. Thus, the elections became a new tool in the hands of the French High Commissioner not only to pacify Syria and encourage the citizens to demonstrate a cooperative attitude but also to discredit the rebels and their chiefs, who claimed to be the legitimate representatives of the whole of Syria. The French moves, especially the declaration that the elections were to determine the relationship of the different vilayets with the Syrian state, made the Syrian nationalists turn against the elections. They declared that Syrians wished for nothing but unity.<sup>285</sup> The other demands included making Lebanon smaller to include only Mount Lebanon, general amnesty, compensation for war damages, a new timeline for the mandate, evacuation of the French troops, and admission of Syria to the League.<sup>286</sup>

The French authorities, however, headed to the elections without any regard for these demands. One reason for this rush was the upcoming extraordinary session of the Permanent Mandate Commission, to be held in Rome from February 16 to March 6, 1926, which was entirely devoted to France and the uprising in Syria. French diplomatic archives contain many

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<sup>282</sup> MAE, vol 50/196, #186, René la Bruyère, "Le programme de Jouvenel," *Journal de Geneve*, 11 Janvier 1926.

<sup>283</sup> De Jouvenel was the first civilian High Commissioner in Syria. See for example, the letter of Badri Talih addressed to the minister of the foreign affairs, MAE, vol. 195, E410, Lyon, 9 novembre 1925.

<sup>284</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 158, Télégramme, secret, "Partie Politique," Jouvenel à Monsieur le président du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, 30 janvier 1926.

<sup>285</sup> More on this, see Khoury, *Syria under the French*, 182-188.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

preparatory files for this important occasion, showing the nervousness of the French officials.<sup>287</sup> The elections, organized at extraordinary speed in the vilayets of Aleppo, Alexandretta, Antioch, and Deir ez-Zor as well as the Alawite State in January 1926, were to be among the positive developments to report. These elections were to showcase the French goodwill policies that respected the mandate provisions.

On the day Barakat resigned, the High Commissioner gave orders to organize elections. The election day was fixed for January 8, 1926, for the first-degree voters and January 22 for the second-round voters.<sup>288</sup> The electoral procedures and laws have been studied closely by Veldkamp, who observed that they resembled the Ottoman electoral system in many ways. The system retained its “singular feature,” the two-stage system, but also an innovation introduced by the Syrian General Congress of the Faysal era – a specified number of the representatives were to be religious minorities.<sup>289</sup> The two-stage system meant that the mass of first-degree voters did not vote directly for the council members, but for the second-round electors, and the latter elected the representatives. Veldkamp has called the obligation for the representation of diverse religious groups a “tokenist” approach aimed at reconciling two potentially opposing objectives: guaranteeing religious minority representation and building a united nation untroubled by religious difference.<sup>290</sup>

The People’s Party first tried to persuade the High Commissioner to postpone the elections until the time when Damascus would also be able to participate. Receiving a negative response, the party decided against the elections, boycotting them everywhere. De Jouvenel soon informed Paris that “the extremist party runs a violent campaign, threatening the local public workers and terrorizing the Christians.”<sup>291</sup> The first surprise came from Aleppo, which de Jouvenel had visited first and which had given him the false impression that the greatest turnout would be there. At first, the vali of Aleppo refused to register many electors, especially the Armenians, and employed another tactic to indirectly discourage participation by ordering the ballot boxes for the Christians to be placed in the mosques and those for the Muslims in the churches. In the meantime, on multiple occasions, people received death threats, causing many notables to refrain from participating in the elections.

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<sup>287</sup> MAE vol. 50/228 #190, # 192, #187, #185, Résolution votée par la Commission des mandats, 19 octobre 1925.

<sup>288</sup> MAE vol. 50/228, #50, Bulletin officiel des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat, août 1923.

<sup>289</sup> Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s Christians,” 237-238; see also Hasan Kayali, “Elections and the Electoral Process in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1919,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 27:3 (1995), 265-286; Khoury, *Syria and the French mandate*, 364-365.

<sup>290</sup> Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s Christians,” 239.

<sup>291</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 127, Jouvenel à Le président du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, 9 janvier 1926.

Furthermore, 14,000 Armenian voters were removed from the voters' list by the local authorities.<sup>292</sup> This move had a considerable impact on the electorate. In May 1924, the number of Armenian refugees stood at 37,897 persons, out of which 16,500 were men and 21,397 were women and children.<sup>293</sup> By excluding 14,000 Armenians (almost the entire men population of refugee Armenians), the number of eligible voters dropped from 44,000 to just 29,000.<sup>294</sup>

Prior to the elections, an extraordinary rapid procedure similar to the one employed in Lebanon one year earlier was introduced to register all the Armenians in Syria. Although citizenship was awarded earlier, neither the Syrians nor the Armenians had done anything until that moment to register the refugees or provide identity cards. Given the political circumstances and the turmoil in Syria, there was no further opposition to citizenship among the Armenians. Everyone embraced the opportunity to receive new identity cards, which would make their presence legal. Within just 10 days, about 10,000 Armenians in Aleppo had received identity cards testifying to their new citizenship and new belonging.<sup>295</sup>

If for the Armenians, the new status was a way to avoid further distinction and persecution, for the French authorities, it reflected the need to raise the number of Christian or pro-mandate voters in Aleppo. This tactic had worked in Lebanon, where it was done with the consent of the Maronite elite. However, it had little chance of succeeding in Syria, especially given the ongoing major political turmoil and armed struggle. The policy put the Armenians in the spotlight once again; especially in the light of the widespread boycott of the elections.<sup>296</sup> This chapter does not attempt to give the whole picture of the boycott and situation in Syria because this is described in detail by Veldkamp.<sup>297</sup> Instead, the chapter aims to reveal the nature of the Armenian participation. Previous research on this subject has attributed a greater role to Armenian participation in providing enough votes against the widespread boycott. Altuğ, for one, has claimed that, in the immediate aftermath of the 1926 elections, “when the High Commissioner decided to redistribute some of the existing seats in the Syrian national

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<sup>292</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 260, Jouvenel à le président du conseil, 9 février 1926; Veldkamp, “The Politics,” 262.

<sup>293</sup> Statistic per region: the most represented refugees were from Ayntab (9.000), followed by Marash (7000), Kharbert 4.500, Kilis 3000, which were all regions close to Aleppo. From internal regions there were less than 1.000, for example only 45 people from Yozgat, see in Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits*, 249.

<sup>294</sup> “huqūq al-’akthāiyya wa al-’aqaliyyāt” [The Rights of the Majority and the Minorities], *Al-Sh’ab*, April, 1, 1928, 2.

<sup>295</sup> “Surio Hayere” [The Armenians of Syria], *Yerevan*, November 8, 1925, 2; “Suriakan Depkere: Hayeru Dirke” [The Events in Syria and the Attitude of the Armenians], *Yerevan*, November 12, 1925, 4.

<sup>296</sup> It was signed by 15 prominent notables, including Ibrahim Hanano, Dr. Abdul Rahman Kayali, Mohammed Toufic Hakim, Saadallah Jabiri, Rushdi Kikhie Abdul Kader Sarmini and others, see MAE vol 50/197 #130, Annexe 4, “Tractes invitant au boycottag des elections, Alep,” see also Veldkamp, “The Politics,” 230.

<sup>297</sup> Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s Christians,” chapter 3 “Refugees, 1921-1936,” and Chapter 6 “Elections.” See also Watenpaugh, “Middle-Class Modernity and the Persistence of the Politics of Notables in Inter-War Syria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.35:2 (2003), 257-286.

representative council or order to counter the nationalist vote – became such an instance where anti-Armenian sentiments were manifested in terms of Muslim-Christian rivalry in Aleppo.”<sup>298</sup> She also mentioned the allocation of two seats to the Armenian refugees in Aleppo. Was this really the case? In the case of the first claim, we have been unable to locate any “Muslim-Christian rivalry in Aleppo” except for a clash on January 10 between the Aleppo protesters and the police and French forces; no local Christians or Armenians were involved. In the case of the second claim, we think Altuğ was referring to the 1928 elections when Armenians had deputies for the first time; no Armenian deputies were elected as a result of the 1926 elections.

### **The Aleppo elections of 1926 and the Armenian participation**

On January 8, 1926, the election day for the first-degree voters, no electors, either Muslim or Christian, showed up in the morning. In the evening, relatively more activity was observed. In the meantime, the countryside voted normally without any extraordinary events. The participation rate in the countryside was as high as 70%. *Nor Pyunik*'s own correspondent reported from Jarablus, close to the Syrian-Turkish border, that people were relatively indifferent toward the election and its outcome. Instead, they were mostly preoccupied with the good harvest that the year promised because of heavy rainfall.<sup>299</sup>

In Aleppo city, out of registered 29,656 electors, only 6,366 had voted. The picture was different in Aleppo's countryside; in Alexandretta, for example, 4215 out of 6534 voted, while in Antioch, 14,353 out of 17,731 did so. In Homs and Hama, on the other hand, the boycott had been complete.<sup>300</sup> This was explained by the fact that many French policies to reform the country would also weaken the power of many leading families. Other forms of intimidation included the distribution of tracts in the streets, propaganda in the bazaars and cafes, and other kinds of pressure.<sup>301</sup>

According to a French intelligence report, as soon as the news reached the nationalist leaders that, despite the boycott calls, certain electors still dared to go to the polls, the threats intensified. The French then arrested 12 nationalist leaders to allow a successful conclusion of

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<sup>298</sup> Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira,” 218. She cited Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 171-172.

<sup>299</sup> “Halepi Entrutyunnere” [Elections in Aleppo], *Nor Pyunik*, January 16, 1926, 3.

<sup>300</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 127, Jouvenel à Monsieur le président du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, 9 janvier 1926.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 231, Bulletin d'information du cabinet du Haut-Commissaire, N :3, Partie Politique, Note pour M. l'envoyé extraordinaire, M.M. les délégués et officiers du S.E., secret, Beyrouth, 4 février 1926.

<sup>301</sup> MAE, vol. 50/196, # 260, Jouvenel à le président du conseil, Paris, 9 février 1926.

the vote. The next day, 30 more persons were arrested because they had reportedly hindered the casting of the ballot by not allowing anyone to approach the ballot box.<sup>302</sup> Sadallah Jabiri was among those arrested.

On January 10, 1,500 persons gathered in the Great Mosque to protest against the arrest of their leaders and demanded the release of the 1,100 prisoners incarcerated in the Aleppo government building.<sup>303</sup> It, therefore, turned out that not 12 but 1,100 persons had been arrested. A violent clash was unavoidable.<sup>304</sup>

Elections and especially the Armenian participation were actively debated after the first-round elections in the local Armenian newspapers – *Suriakan Mamul* (Henchak) and *Nor Pyunik* (ARF). The violence of January 10 certainly set the mood for the second-round elections that were to take place on January 21, 1926. *Suriakan Mamul* published a long list of recommendations to the Armenian second-round voters “to prevent any wrong-doings.” The paper announced that Armenian second-round electors formed one-fifth of the total electors. Any Armenian elector – whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox – should not give his ballot to an Armenian candidate just for the sake of “national pride,” which was nonsense, or from the desire to see an Armenian deputy in the Syrian parliament. It was enough to confess that there was not a single candidate who could represent Armenians in the Syrian parliament properly. The one or two Armenians who ran were average citizens.

More importantly, although Armenians were granted citizenship, as well as the right to elect and be elected by the international treaties (Lausanne), these privileges were opposed by many natives. During the first-degree elections, the Syrian ballot-box controllers had shouted at the Armenian voters, “What are you doing here? Is here Armenia?” Even if Armenians voted for an Armenian candidate out of “national pride and dignity,” would the elected candidate be able to defend their rights? There were serious doubts that he could. The language barrier was enough for him to fail. Such a candidate would be a mere “decoration” in the Parliament. Therefore, was it worth worsening relations with the locals in such a situation? Insisting on an Armenian candidate also meant pushing for political goals in Syria, which could be incompatible with Armenian claims and declarations. The paper concluded that a mere chair in

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<sup>302</sup> “Manramasnutyunner Halepi Mej Teghi Unetcatc Ankargutyants Masin,” [Details about the Incidents o Aleppo], *Nor Pyunik*, January 16, 1926, 1.

<sup>303</sup> MAE, vol.50/197, Renseignement du Levant, Janvier 1926, 8.

<sup>304</sup> Details about this incident see Veldkamp, “The Politics,” Watenpaugh, “Middle-Class Modernity.”

the Aleppo Representative Council did not promise happiness for the Armenians; on the contrary, it would cause many problems.<sup>305</sup>

Instead, second-round voters were advised to appreciate the seriousness of the situation, Syria was still in the making, elected deputies were to draft a constitution, and only capable candidates were to be elected.<sup>306</sup> This notwithstanding, *Suriakan Mamul* voiced its firm expectations from the Orthodox candidate: Armenians as equal citizens were to enjoy the same rights along with the other communities; nothing more, nothing less. In the previous Representative Council, there had been a suggestion to disperse the refugees; in case this proposal was raised again, it was the duty of the elected candidate to do everything in his capacity to disallow it “so that Armenians can live freely and peacefully in their second homeland.” State aid for Armenian schools was desirable as well as exemption of taxes for at least six to seven years. In addition, the settlement of the refugees and the creation of employment opportunities were essential. The most important task, however, was the facilitation of the rapprochement between the Armenians and the Arabs by forming a Syrian-Armenian committee to bridge the communities.<sup>307</sup> It was clear, then, that Henschaks, considering the overall political situation and the renewed anti-refugee sentiments among the locals, did not support the idea of having an Armenian candidate. Instead, their favored strategy was to keep the Armenian community as low-profile as possible by not attracting additional attention in the already overheated political atmosphere. The most suitable candidate identified by the Henschaks was Michel Jenadi, the candidate of the Greek Orthodox community.

The Armenian prelacy of Aleppo was equally concerned. An important meeting was convened in the prelacy to select the Armenian candidate. All three political parties, most compatriotic unions, and the two Armenian Red Crosses were invited. Two possible candidates were identified, Mazlumian of the Baron Hotel and P. Khachaturian, a famous merchant. A third candidate, L. Tamzarian, who was a lawyer, soon emerged as an independent candidate. Mazlumian turned down the offer, and since there was no unanimity in the prelacy, the idea of having an “official” candidate was dropped. The merchant, a wealthy notable, lacked the skills expected in a deputy, while L. Tamzarian spoke perfect Arabic and knew the local laws but remained an independent candidate. In the pages of the Ramkavar *Arev*, voters were called to

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<sup>305</sup> “Zgacumi Tegh Banakanutyun, Hay Erkrord Kargi Entroghneru Ushadrutyun” [Wisdom Instead of Emotions: to the Armenian Second-Round Electors], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 15, 1926, 2.

<sup>306</sup> “Erkrord Kargi Entroghneru Dirke” [The Position of the Second-Round Electors], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 17, 1926, 2.

<sup>307</sup> “Te Inch Petk e Ella Mer Entrelineru Plastfome” [What Shall be the Profiles of our Candidates], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 20, 1926, 2.



elect the most capable person without naming anyone.<sup>308</sup> *Arev* was also angry about the unconstructive attitude of the Henschaks, who supported the Greek candidate.

On January 20, 1926, Jenadi addressed a call to the Armenian voters, which was published in the *Suriakan Mamul*. “Considering that the Orthodox chair for which I am a candidate is common for all the Orthodox communities, whose majority are Armenians, I commit to defend the rights and interests of the Armenians the best I can, as I have done previously. I shall make efforts to prevent any violence against the Armenians, and make Armenian-Syrian relations warmer.”<sup>309</sup>

The second-round elections took place as planned, calm and uneventful. In total, 416 second-electors cast their ballots. Out of these, 91 were invalid ballots, leaving 325 ballots.<sup>310</sup> Notably, the Armenians had 82 second-round voters, while the Greek Orthodox had only seven. This notwithstanding, the Orthodox deputy was the Greek candidate and not the Armenian. Narek Abrahamian was the only Armenian deputy elected in Antioch, a place from which an Armenian deputy was elected even in pre-mandate Ottoman Syria.<sup>311</sup>

Once the election results were known, *Arev* criticized the Henschaks even more severely. It claimed that Janji’s candidature was dangerous for the Armenians since he had been the author of the *tagdir* in the previous Representative Council, demanding the removal of Armenians from Syria. It was incomprehensible to *Arev* why the Armenians, who had 82 voters compared to just seven Greek voters, had given their voice to the Greek candidate.<sup>312</sup> *Arev* also admitted that both the ARF and Ramkavars had remained neutral in these elections while the prelacy, already plagued by many crises, had been unable to present a unified Armenian candidate, all of which combined to explain the “Armenian defeat” in these elections. The only positive result had been the re-election of Subhi Barakat, who was famous for his pro-Armenian attitude, and who had previously rejected Janji’s anti-Armenian *tagdir* together with the Catholic deputy

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<sup>308</sup> Sepakan Tghtaktsen, “Entrakan Paykare Surio Mej, Henschaknere Uj Piti Tan Huyni Me Entrutyane” [The Electoral Struggle in Syria: Henschaks to Support the Greek Candidate], *Arev*, January 26, 1926, 2.

<sup>309</sup> “Metsargo Erkrord Kargi Entroghnerun, Michel Jenadi” [The Call of Michel Jenadi to the Armenian Second-Round Voters], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 22, 1926, 2.

<sup>310</sup> 184 votes for the Muslim candidate Ghalib Ibrahim, 228 votes for Reshid Munderras, 130 votes for Jewish candidate Rahmi Nahmet, 120 votes for Orthodox candidate Michel Jenadi, 80 for Khachatur Shahen, 62 for Teodor Antaki, 48 for Basil Antaki, 15 for Levon Tamzarian, 1 for Yorzaki Zemire, 134 for Catholic candidate Selim Jumbert, 75 for Kustaki Saba, 49 for Basil Ozaji, 41 for Reful Hindiye, 17 for Iskander Selim, 10 for Yorzaki Kebabe, see “Entrutyanyan Ardyunknere” [The Election Results], *Suriakan Mamul*, January 22, 1926, 2.

<sup>311</sup> “Entrutyunnere” [Elections], *Nor Pyunik*, January 30, 1926, 2.

<sup>312</sup> Own correspondent, “Suriakan Entruteants Mej: Hayeru Partutyune” [The Defeat of the Armenians in the Syrian Elections], *Arev*, February 2, 1926, 2.

Selim Jumbert, who was also re-elected. Thus, although the Armenians did not have their own deputy, at least two friendly deputies were there to defend their rights in these difficult times.<sup>313</sup>

The result of the vote, as established by a secret French report, had been the following: vilayet of Aleppo 57%, Aleppo 22,50%; and the sanjak of Alexandretta 69%.<sup>314</sup> In total, 243,487 people had participated in the elections.<sup>315</sup> The French intelligence report announced that out of the 31 elected deputies at least 25 were pro-mandate.<sup>316</sup> The 12 deputies of Aleppo met on February 25, 1926, to put forward their demands, which were as follows: Turkish vilayet laws to be applied in Syria and Lebanon, attachment of Deir ez-Zor and Alexandretta to Aleppo, and drafting of a constitution. They also expressed gratitude to the French authorities for their efforts to delimitate the border with Turkey, which would improve trade.<sup>317</sup>

Could the 82 Armenian voters have a “significant” impact on the vote outcome in Syria, enabling the election of 25 pro-mandate candidates? Or could they have any impact in Aleppo, from where the 12 deputies were elected? We think this is unlikely. There was no unanimity among the Armenians about whom to vote for. Different circles had different candidates in mind. Even if the Henchaks advocated for the Greek Orthodox candidate, it is uncertain if all 82 Armenian votes were in his favor. Considering the substantial diversity among the Armenians, we have serious doubts that the Henchaks could influence all the voters. One thing is clear; the Armenians tried to have a low profile in these elections and to avoid having an Armenian deputy.

Significantly, the Aleppo elections took place in a heated political atmosphere for both the Syrians and the Armenians. Not only did they occur in the middle of political turmoil in the country, which produced a violent outburst in Aleppo, but, most importantly, after a major incident in the Armenian refugee camp. On October 18, 1925, just two and half months before the election, one of the Armenian refugee camps was attacked in Damascus, leaving 50 dead. This incident had come as a shock to the Armenians and had a profound impact upon them. Although it had happened in Damascus and not in Aleppo, it was a clear sign to the Armenians to stand back from the political scene and be more cautious. The voting figures reflect this; the Armenian voting numbers were not that large in the towns compared to the countryside. We shall witness the same in the later elections too.

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> MAE 50/196, # 158, Télégramme, secret, “Partie politique,” Jouvenel à affaires étrangères, 30 janvier 1926, 7

<sup>315</sup> MAE 50/196, # 260, Jouvenel à le président du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, Paris, 9 février 1926.

<sup>316</sup> The number of the deputies was set 38, but only 31 were elected since elections were boycotted in Homs and Hama, no one was elected from there. MAE 50/197, #104 Service des renseignements du Levant, “Les élections dans l’état de Syrie et dans l’état des alaouites,” janvier 1926, 15.

<sup>317</sup> “Halepi Patgamavorneru Papage” [The Wish of the Aleppo’s Deputies], *Nor Pyunik*, March 3, 1926, 2.

Finally, more than the elections, Armenian refugees were primarily preoccupied with their daily bread, which had become problematic given the political turmoil in Aleppo during the elections. Since most refugees were daily laborers and lived from day to day, they were condemned to starvation after the violent incident of January 10, when the shops remained closed for many days. Jeppe testified that the conditions of many refugees had deteriorated dramatically; many were starving, others had sold everything to buy food, and Armenian beggars were seen in the streets of Aleppo once again.<sup>318</sup>

### **Syria's political scene on the eve of "national" elections**

The new French High Commissioner, Henri Ponsot, arrived in Beirut in early October 1926. He came to replace de Jouvenel, who was judged to be too liberal and too soft. His main tasks remained the same; to restore the French imperial prestige and the firm French control over the whole of Syria. Like his predecessors, Ponsot embarked on touring all major cities of Syria and Lebanon and meeting the local authorities. Unlike his predecessors, however, Ponsot neither made announcements nor gave any promises. Instead, he listened patiently to the people's demands, mostly identical to those delivered to his predecessors. In Damascus, for example, such demands included general amnesty, Syrian unity, compensation for the damage during the Revolt, drafting of an organic law, the election of a legislative parliament, the conclusion of a Franco-Syrian treaty similar to the British-Iraqi one, and admission of Syria into the League of Nations.<sup>319</sup> As we know, France was required to promulgate an organic law for Syria and Lebanon within three years from the start of the mandate (September 29, 1923). Previously, de Jouvenel had done his best to meet these requirements by hastily organizing elections. However, one of the major cities, Damascus (along with Jabal al-Druze), had been excluded because of the Revolt. Ponsot's new task was to organize general elections in the whole of Syria as soon as possible. His objective was twofold: to report a positive development in the upcoming LoN's Permanent Mandate Commission and pacify Syria.

By the end of May 1927, Ponsot had already designed his main political strategies in Syria and Lebanon. His program made public in July 1927 included French dominance, the conducting of elections, the election of a Constituent Assembly, and voting on an organic law.<sup>320</sup> One of the first acts of the elected Assembly was to be the definition of the relationship between Syria, Lebanon, the Alawite State, and Druze. It is noteworthy that this statement, the

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<sup>318</sup> SDN, C1430, League of Nations, from Karen Jeppe to Thomas Albert, Geneva August 27, 1926.

<sup>319</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 245.

<sup>320</sup> Peter Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 6.

main reason for the boycott of the elections and the violence in Aleppo in 1926, was being repeated. This time, however, the statement came with the announcement that Ponsot had decided to unite the states of Alawite and Druze to form a unified Syrian state. These announcements did little to dispel the worries of the Syrians, and the reaction was overwhelmingly negative; first, because nothing was mentioned about a French-Syrian treaty, and second, no one believed that the French authorities would unite Syria.<sup>321</sup> This notwithstanding, the Syrian nationalists did not hurry to make an announcement until October 1927, which revealed their conciliatory mood. The October declaration was the result of a six-day-long conference held in Beirut and attended by 15 distinguished nationalists from Syria and Lebanon. It had conceived the so-called National Bloc (*al-Kutla al-wataniyya*) that would dominate political life in Syria throughout the mandate.<sup>322</sup> With this declaration, a new era labeled “honorable cooperation” began in French-Syrian relations.

Ponsot, for his part, opted for “honorable cooperation,” finding the timing for such cooperation particularly apt. The French authorities immediately announced the end of martial law and press censorship as well as an amnesty for the nationalists who had supported the rebels, including Faris al-Khury, and the al-Bakri brothers (Nasib and Fawzi), as well as many prominent communists. It was said that the policy of granting an amnesty to some but not all was intended to create further divisions among the nationalists.<sup>323</sup>

The next task in Ponsot’s program was the organization of the country-wide elections, scheduled for April 10 and 24, 1928. In fact, preparations for these elections had been in process since August 31, 1927, when the service des renseignements (the intelligence) was ordered to make detailed reports about the political parties in all the localities of Syria, their numerical strength, potential candidates, chances of success, and their attitude toward the mandate. Soon the reports arrived, revealing no surprises. In the countryside, there were no political parties as such, and “it was up to us to push or discourage candidates.” In Aleppo, the nationalists would win if left free, while in Damascus, a serious electoral battle with an uncertain outcome was guaranteed.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>322</sup> Seven members formed the initial core of the Bloc: Ihsan al-Sharif from Damascus, Ibrahim Hananu and Abd al-Rahamn al-Kayyali from Aleppo, Najib al-Barazi and Abd al-Qadir al-Kaylani from Hama, Mazhar Raslan and Hashim al-Atasi from Homs. More members were to join in the spring of 1928 when many political exiled leaders were allowed to return. Khoury, Syria and the *French Mandate*, 248.

<sup>323</sup> Along with the amnesty, a so-called “black list” with 64 names was also published, including Dr. Abd al-Rahaman Shahbandar, Shukri al-Quwwatly, and Sultan al-Atrash, whose return was still forbidden. See in CADN-SL 466, decree N: 1817, singé par Ponsot, 16 fevrier 1928.

<sup>324</sup> CADN-SL 398, Service des Renseignements, Captain Collet, Damas, 30 septembre 1927.

To counter the nationalists, it was declared that the existing electoral laws were to be employed, which would keep the illiterate countryside under the government/French control. The nationalists were perfectly aware of this strategy and, in vain, lobbied to have the *sanjak* as the electoral constituency instead of much smaller qadas. The French insistence on the existing electoral law constituted part of the policy of keeping the nationalists divided. If the latter boycotted the elections as they had done previously, they would be excluded from the Assembly; if they participated and lost, their claims to be the nation's representatives would be nullified.<sup>325</sup> It was also noted that there was a clear separation between the "nationalists" and the "extremists," the latter mostly being those nationalists who were exiled outside Syria but who had considerable power within the country, and whose orders were followed.<sup>326</sup>

"Were there any political parties in Syria?" Such was the provocative editorial on the front page of the Damascene *Les Echos*. The article noted that in the Syrian reality, there were only vaguely defined goals and similarly vaguely defined groupings of "nationalists, Peoples' Party, national bloc, moderates, and extremists." They also largely defended the same goals; "Syrian interests, unity, understanding with the mandate"... Moreover, Syrians were at the mercy of the whims of their leaders, who switched camps as it suited them.<sup>327</sup>

Gontaut-Biron, who had been in Syria in the early days of the French arrival and then for a second time in 1928, noted that, under the current conditions, constitutional reforms and the inauguration of a parliament in Syria ironically meant reinforcement of despotism and feudalism. Originally, the reforms were intended to focus on socio-economic issues and improved living conditions rather than political changes. This notwithstanding, everyone was preparing for the upcoming elections.

Initially, the National Bloc and the government joined forces in Damascus by submitting a joint list of candidates; however, the government was soon accused of widespread fraud and bribery. Consequently, several demonstrations were staged by both sides. The voting turnout had been 60% in Damascus, the highest ever, resulting in the election of nine deputies from Damascus, out of which seven were Bloc members.<sup>328</sup> Nationalists also dominated in Aleppo, although there, the voter turnout had been just 35%. Here, the main figure was Subhi Barakat, who had allied with the Christian minorities by bribing them.<sup>329</sup> Once this became known, however, the Christian leaders were threatened by the Syrian government. The Christians,

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<sup>325</sup> MAE, vol. 204, Ponsot à Briand, 15 mars 1928, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 15.

<sup>326</sup> R. Gontaut Biron, *Sur les Routes de Syrie après 9 ans de mandat* (1928), 58.

<sup>327</sup> "Y a-t-il des parties en Syrie?," *Les Echos* (later it became *Les Echos De Damas*), 11 novembre 1928, 1.

<sup>328</sup> CADN-SL 398, Information N: 301, Beirut May 4, 1928, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 16.

<sup>329</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 16, see also Joel Veldkamp, "The Politics of Aleppo's Christians."

caught between two sides, had reportedly taken the bribes and advised their respective communities not to participate.<sup>330</sup> In Aleppo, as in Homs and Hama, nationalists swept the vote. However, the total number of seats they won was only 22 out of 70, thus merely one-third. The other 48 men were best described by Ponsot, after he had met them all. He said that the vast majority of the elected *rural* deputies who played the role of “moderates” were leaderless, divided by clan rivalries, and no match for the more skillful, urban, nationalist politicians.<sup>331</sup> The fears of the nationalists that the French authorities would use their power over the countryside were, thus, justified. It was precisely this factor that the French intelligence services used to guide the illiterate rural masses to vote for the candidates the French had chosen. This notwithstanding, both the Syrian nationalists and the historians of interwar Syria would highlight the Christian vote, especially in Aleppo, which had a substantial non-Muslim community, attributing “a major role” to the Armenians who had altered the demographic picture of Aleppo and contributed to the election of the pro-French candidates.<sup>332</sup> Were these claims justified? What had been the participation of the Armenians at this time?

### **The Armenian participation**

As news of the new elections became known, all the Armenian circles began actively debating the topic. We have traced these debates through the pages of the Armenian newspapers and the Alepine Ramkavar organ *Yeprat*, in particular. Armenians had already participated in the Representative Council of Aleppo elections just two years ago. However, the upcoming elections were different because, this time, deputies were to be elected to the *Assemblée Constituante* to draft a constitution. Moreover, this time, Armenians were not only to vote but also to stand. There was, therefore, an urgent need to be better prepared for these elections in order to avoid the mistakes of the previous one, when they had been unable to use their 82 ballots to elect an Armenian deputy. According to *Yeprat*, myriad reasons were identified for the failure, for example, lack of national consensus, inadequate candidates, and lack of experience. Thus, in order to succeed this time, there was an urgent need to find the most suitable candidates and coordinate all efforts to make their election possible. The ideal

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<sup>330</sup> Noteworthy, Subhi was less popular among the Muslims and foreseeing the absence of the Christian voters, had withdrawn his candidacy at the last minute CADN-SL 466, Délégué-Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire de Damas à Ponsot, le Haut-Commissaire, 27 April 1928, cited in Khoury, *Syria and the French*, 335.

<sup>331</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 17.

<sup>332</sup> Altuğ, “Making of Refugee-ness and Armenians in French Syria; Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira; Watenpauß, “Towards a New Category of Colonial Theory: Colonial Cooperation and the Survivors’ Bargain: The Case of the Post-Genocide Armenian Community of Syria under French Mandate” in *The British and French*, ed. Peter Sluglett et al., 597-622.

candidate, as *Yeprat* put it, should have mastered two languages other than Armenian – Arabic and French, which was a tough challenge. Among the 35–40,000 Armenians of Aleppo, hardly any candidates met this criterion.<sup>333</sup>

The Armenian Orthodox community was allocated two seats. Initially, an effort was made by the Armenian prelacy to have its “official” Armenian candidates. To this end, an important meeting was convened in Aleppo with the participation of 23 notables representing different political circles. In a secret vote, Mihran Byuzandian and Levon Papazian received 14 votes each, Festekchian – seven, Miletbashian – five, and Berberian – one. Byuzandian and Papazian, thus, were declared the official candidates.<sup>334</sup> This notwithstanding, at the beginning of April 1928, five other Armenians put their names forward as well.<sup>335</sup> When a few days later, one of the candidates, Tamzarian, renounced his candidacy, four others (Tatian, Miletbashian, Berberian, and Dalemkerian) applied, thus swelling the number of the Armenian candidates to eight, who competed for just two seats.<sup>336</sup> All of them were from the non-refugee Armenian community, most were born in Aleppo or in Aleppo vilayat.<sup>337</sup> However, not all of them could speak Arabic, French or even Armenian, although all of them spoke Turkish.

As preparations were underway, *Deghri Yol*’s call to the Armenians of Aleppo was printed in *Yeprat*. It first congratulated the Armenians on their newly acquired rights, hoping they would be used with wisdom. The paper then called on the Armenians to unite, put aside their damaging political rivalries, and demonstrate exemplary conduct to the other communities.<sup>338</sup>

This time, the elections passed without any major violence. Armenians were once again the main topic of discussion in the Syrian nationalist press. These newspapers criticized the Armenians’ right to participate in the “national” elections because they had not lived long

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<sup>333</sup> Editorial, “Yerespokhanakan Entrutyunnere” [The Deputy Elections], *Yeprat*, March 21, 1928, 1.

<sup>334</sup> “Hay Yerespokhannere Voroshats” [The Armenian Deputies are Known], *Yeprat*, April 7, 1928, 2.

<sup>335</sup> Editorial, “Dardzyal entrut’yunnere” [Again the elections], *Yeprat*, April 4, 1928, 1.

<sup>336</sup> The other four candidates were Papazian, Byuzadian, Janjikian, Festekchian.

<sup>337</sup> Tatian was born in Urfa, studied Law in Istanbul, and spoke Armenian, Turkish and French. Miletbashian was born in Ayntab, he was a lawyer and spoke Turkish. Dalemkerian was born in Aleppo, he was a geographer and spoke Armenian, Turkish, and some Arabic and French. Berberian was born in Kilis, and graduated from the American College of Ayntab, he was a lawyer, and spoke Armenian, Turkish and English. Papazian was born in Aleppo, he was a doctor, had been a member of the previous Representative Council, and spoke Armenian, Arabic, Turkish and French. Byuzadian was born in Aleppo, he was the former director of the Ottoman bank of Ayntab, he had been a member to the previous Economic Committee, he spoke Armenian, Arabic, Turkish and French. Janjikian was born in Aleppo, he was a state official of public works and spoke Arabic and French. Festegchian was born in Ayntab, graduating the American college there. He was a trained lawyer who held different positions in the Armenian national institutions and spoke Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, French, and English. “Teknatsuneru Hakirj Kensagrakannere” [The Brief Biographies of the Candidates], *Yeprat*, April 4, 1928, 3.

<sup>338</sup> “Mer Hay Hayrenakitnerin” [From Our Armenian Compatriots], *Deghri Yol*, cited in *Yeprat*, April 7, 1928, 2.

enough in Syria to deserve that privilege.<sup>339</sup> No wonder the newly arrived Armenian refugees who had already come under the spotlight because of their speedy acquisition of citizenship and the polemic about their participation in the Revolt, were the main targets. One more factor made Armenian participation much more visible; Armenians had the right to not only vote but also to stand for the first time. Thus, once again, an aggressive press campaign was launched against them even though the electoral laws simply demanded Syrian citizenship, without any requirement for a minimum or maximum timeframe between the acquisition of citizenship and the right to elect and stand.<sup>340</sup> Thus, there was no formal or legal hindrance to Armenian refugees participating in these elections as they had already done two years earlier in both Aleppo and Beirut.

However, what contributed to the anti-Armenian discourse in Aleppo was another factor. It was the decision to elect 11 deputies from Aleppo, which made the number of Muslim deputies five, while the “minorities” had six, as the nationalist *Al-Sha‘b* of Damascus put it. The paper lamented that, although the number of Armenians and other Orthodox communities did not qualify them to have more than one candidate, they were nevertheless given two. Thus, the irony was that the minorities (*al-aqaliyyāt*) were entitled to six deputies and the majority (*al-akṣariyyat*) only five.<sup>341</sup>

This article in *Al-Sha‘b* has been wrongly cited in the works of Seda Altuğ to show that the Armenian participation in the elections and the seats allocated by the French had influenced the vote outcome, at least in Aleppo. Altuğ’s other argument about the Armenian refugees stemmed from the first; by allocating these seats, the French wished to change the demographic balance in Aleppo, and it was only natural that the Armenians would have a role to play.<sup>342</sup> The most recent studies, and particularly the work of Joel Veldkamp, which examined the elections in Aleppo in detail, have shown that such claims were oversimplified and erroneous.<sup>343</sup>

In fact, the French authorities quickly realized the dangers of the situation and offered a constructive solution. The Jewish representative was to be elected from Damascus instead of Aleppo.<sup>344</sup> This decision was crucial because it left 10 deputies for Aleppo, with equal

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<sup>339</sup> Editorial, “Hay ‘b’ Kargi Entroghneru” [To the Second-Round Armenian Voters], *Yeprat*, April 18, 1928, 1.

<sup>340</sup> The other requirements for the first-round voters were to be at least 21 years old and have a residency in the locality where their name was registered. For the second-round voters, the age was set as at least 25 years, while for the deputies 30 years old.

<sup>341</sup> “Huqūq al-’akthāiya wa al-’aqaliyyāt” [The Rights of the Majority and the Minorities], *Al-Sh‘ab*, April, 1, 1928, 2.

<sup>342</sup> Seda Altuğ, “Syrian Armenian Memory and the Refugee Issue in Syria under the French Mandate (1921-46),” *Armenian Weekly Magazine* (2012).

<sup>343</sup> Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s,” 110.

<sup>344</sup> Damascus had the right to appoint 13 deputies.



distribution among the “majority”<sup>345</sup> and the “minorities.”<sup>346</sup> This solution helped remove one criticism of the Armenians but did little to stop the ongoing anti-Armenian campaign.

Considering the numerous anti-Armenian articles in the Syrian nationalist newspapers, *Yeprat* called on the Armenian second-round voters to exercise wisdom and caution, voting for the best candidates, without class or ethnicity bias, to serve the interests of the whole Syrian nation.<sup>347</sup> In the next issue, the paper was more explicit; Syria had been in decline for many years, even centuries. Currently, “with a kind gesture” (*geghecik jestov me*), the LoN had awarded the mandate of Syria to France, a country that had been in the vanguard of human civilization for centuries... France had brought peace and development and promised wellbeing and happiness...

Shall France ever decide to leave Syria, we, Muslims and Christians together, shall beg her not to leave us without a head (*anter ev inknaglukh*). Those who propagate for complete independence do so out of emotions rather than logic. Thus, we must vote in these elections for the candidates who favor cooperation with the mandatory power to lead this poor country toward development, revival, and happiness.<sup>348</sup>

It must be said that such views were not confined to *Yeprat* but were shared by most Armenians, which did not mean that the Armenians favored the French mandate for Syria and were entirely on the French side, as claimed by most historians. In fact, the reason for such views was the Armenian conviction that no Syrian statehood was possible without a European mandate. For them, the Armenian example was more than enough; the Ottoman Armenians had failed to secure a Western mandate and had, therefore, failed to secure a state.<sup>349</sup>

It was significant that the election candidates supported by the major Armenian language newspaper were not nationalists. Moreover, on its second page, the paper provided the names and short biographies of the “right candidates.” The list included Kalib Ibrahim, the current governor of Aleppo, Rashid bey Mudarris, Subhi bey, Nasri bey Bakhsh, Hasan Fuat bey, Jelal bey Kudsi, Naum al-Chermikli (the Assyrian Orthodox representative), Dr. Levon Papazian and Mihran Byuzandian (the two Armenian Orthodox representatives), and Naman

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<sup>345</sup> According to Benjamin Thomas White, the word “minority” was used infrequently until 1930s, when it became suddenly widespread both among the Syrians and the French records; however, Veldkamp has recently noted that the term “minority” was used in the 1920 constitution (articles 65 and 67) and was also ubiquitous in the French records from 1923 onwards, see in White, *The Emergence of Minorities*, 2; Veldkamp, “The Politics, 237, ft29. For the constitution’s text, see Elizabeth F. Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs, The Syrian Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (UK: Grove Press, 2020), 565-566.

<sup>346</sup> “Erespokhanakan Entrutyunnere” [The Deputy Elections], *Yeprat*, April 14, 1928, 3.

<sup>347</sup> Editorial, “Hay ‘b’ Kargi Entroghnerun” [To the Armenian Second-Round Voters], *Yeprat*, April 18, 1928, 1.

<sup>348</sup> Editorial, “Fransia ev Suria: Entrutyants Artiv” [France and Syria: Elections], *Yeprat*, April 21, 1928, 1.

<sup>349</sup> “Sureatcinere ev Hayere” [Syrians and the Armenians], *Yeprat*, July 25, 1928.

Sukias (the Armenian Catholic representative) – all of whom were pro-government.<sup>350</sup> The paper, however, could not completely ignore the most distinguished nationalist candidates; therefore, under the title “Other Candidates,” it provided the names of Ibrahim Hanano, Dr. Kayyali, Sadaalah al-Jabiri, and Shakir Nimet al-Shabani. It mentioned that, although these men were nationalists who tried to be useful to their homeland, it remained unclear what their program was and how it differed from that of candidates from the pro-government list.<sup>351</sup>

Were the Armenians the only readers of these articles? It appears not, for *Yeprat* soon published an angry, anti-Armenian article from *An-Nahda* (Aleppo), which called for the Armenians not to oppose the Syrians politically, maneuver, or play with their destiny. Instead, it asked them to support the Syrians politically so they (Armenians) could live in the country peacefully, which would also be in the Armenian interests. The paper was explicit; Armenians had two options – either to abstain from voting or to vote for the nationalist candidates “who enjoyed the trust of the nation and worked for the wellbeing of the nation:”

Is there anyone who could explain you the importance of your position, since you are a majority and the expectations from you? Brothers, we have supported you when you needed it, do not exchange it with wrong-doing. We are watching you closely.<sup>352</sup>

*Yeprat*'s response was published right after the article. It first noted that *Nahda*'s reference to Syrian hospitality in the context of the elections was inappropriate. The Armenians of Aleppo considered themselves as much Syrians as the Alepines did, for 90% of them came from the places belonging to the former Aleppo vilayet – Ayntab, Marash, and Kilis. Secondly, Armenians were not a majority, as claimed by *An-Nahda*. Out of the total 500 votes, Armenians were allocated 100 ballots; thus, only one-fifth of the total. The Armenians only wished to contribute to the development of the country.<sup>353</sup>

The accusations in *An-Nahda* showed once again the perception that the Armenian refugees posed a threat due to their numerical strength in Aleppo. The false belief, widespread during the 1926 elections, that the election outcome was in the hands of the Armenians was once again prominent. However, the figures show that, in both cases, the high levels of voting had been in the countryside, where French influence was strong, and not the towns, where most of the Armenians lived.

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<sup>350</sup> “Halepi Erespokhanakan Teknatsunere” [The Deputies of Aleppo], *Yeprat*, 21 April 1928, 3; “Entrutyants Nakhoreakin” [On the Eve of the Elections], *Yeprat*, April 23, 1928, 2.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> “An-Nahdayi Gergrich Hodvatse: Mer Hay Eghbaynerun” [The Provocative Article of an-Nahda: To Our Armenian Brothers], *Yeprat*, April 23, 1928, 3.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

Similar articles and the active confrontation between the nationalists and the pro-government forces foresaw passive participation for the Armenians and the Christians, in general. After the second round, it became quickly obvious that, as in the previous elections, the turnout had been low in Aleppo and relatively higher in the countryside.<sup>354</sup>

Despite the low turnout, the National Bloc had won almost everywhere. In Aleppo, 10 deputies were elected, all but one on the nationalist ticket. Among the Muslim deputies, there were Ibrahim Hanano, Sa'dallah al-Jabiri, Dr. Abdulrahman Kayyali, Ahmed al-Rifa'i, and Sheikh Abdulzade Semioni. George Azar was from the Assyrian Orthodox community, while Lafif Kanime was the Catholic Assyrian representative. For the first time, there were also three Armenian names among the elected, Mihran Byuzandian and Nicoghos Janjikian (famous under his Arabized name Janji), representing the Orthodox Armenians, while Fathallah Asiyun was the Catholic deputy. Another Armenian, Movses Ter-Galustian, the ARF candidate, was elected from Antioch.<sup>355</sup> It must be noted that all the Armenians were from the so-called "*Arman al-kadim*" (Old Armenians) non-refugee community. Byuzandian had initially been on the pro-government list but, after the elections, the nationalists chose him to fill the second vacant Armenian Orthodox seat.<sup>356</sup> This meant that, although *Yeprat* was openly and clearly pro-government and pro-French, there were two distinct electoral lists; each with their Armenian candidates. Moreover, regardless of the outcome of the elections, Armenians, like other "minorities," were guaranteed their allocated seats in the Assembly. As Byuzandian's example showed, success did not necessarily depend on the original list the candidates appeared on.

### **Constitutional crises, Armenians guilty once again**

On June 9, 1928, the newly elected Assembly met for the first time, composed of rural and conservative "moderates" who sat in fezzes and the urban and modern "nationalists" in their European suits. Hashem al-Atassi was elected the president of the chamber while Ibrahim Hanano, Chairman of the Assembly Committee, was tasked with drafting the constitution.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> In Aleppo the turnout was 35.3 percent (out of 50,453 voters only 17,852 voted), by contrast in Idlib the turnout was 65 percent, in Bab 74 percent, in Jisr Saghur 92 percent, see in "Entrutyunner" [Elections], *Yeprat*, April 18, 1928, 3.

<sup>355</sup> Movses Ter-Galustian was a native of Jabal Musa (Antioch), and a famous self-defense hero of the WWI. More about him and his organized heroic defense see in Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Armenians of Musa Dagh, from Obscurity to Genocide and Fame, 1840-1915* (Fresno: California State University, 2020), Shemmassian, *The Musa Dagh Armenians: A Socioeconomic and Cultural History, 1919-1939* (Beirut: Haigazian University, 2015), Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (Verba Mundi revised, 2012).

<sup>356</sup> "Entrutyunneren Verj" [After the Elections], *Yeprat*, May 2 1928, 2.

<sup>357</sup> George Hadad, *Fifty Years of Modern Syria and Lebanon* (Beirut: Deir al-Hayat, 1950), 79; Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 19.

Within six weeks, the draft constitution was ready with 115 articles that foresaw a parliamentary republic with a president, cabinet, and chamber of deputies, elected by universal suffrage for four years.

Although the elections had ended, the anti-Armenian campaign had not. On the contrary, the presence of the three Armenian deputies in the Assembly was not well regarded by most Syrian nationalists. *Al-Sha‘b* published an article on July 26, 1928, stating that “the mere presence of the Armenian deputies in the Syrian Assembly was a result of despotic politics.”<sup>358</sup> Meanwhile, a Syrian diasporic committee active in the USA sent a circular on the occasion of the opening of the Assembly,<sup>359</sup> asking the Syrian nationalists *to strip the Syrian citizenship from the Armenians and the Circassians*, making sure that none of them was appointed in the government.<sup>360</sup> It is noteworthy that Armenians and Circassians were grouped together and considered unworthy of having either the local citizenship or the right to be elected as deputies. In Part III, we shall see how Armenians and Circassians were continually mentioned together.

Other Syrian papers, among them *al-Mirsad*, constantly referred to the Syrian Revolt, reminding the Syrians about the crimes committed by the Armenians and the Circassians, who now enjoyed the same rights as the Syrians. The paper declared that the interests of the homeland dictated expelling the Armenians and Circassians, as the Turks had done previously.<sup>361</sup>

So, what had sparked the renewed anti-Armenian polemic this time? It is noteworthy that the *Al-Mirsad* article appeared just one day before the last meeting of the Assembly, during which Ter-Galustian had joined his colleagues from the Alexandretta in insisting on a special status for the Sanjak of Alexandretta

On August 9, 1928, the Assembly met to discuss and approve the draft Constitution. As expected, the French delegate asked the deputies to remove the six controversial articles that

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<sup>358</sup> *Al-Sha‘b*, July 26, 1928 (N: 314) cited in Movses Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Kernank Chezok Mnak?” [Syrian National Movement and Our Position: Can We Remain Neutral?], (a), *Husaber*, December 17, 1928, 1.

<sup>359</sup> More about the Syrian diaspora in the USA and their activities, see in Fathrenthold, *Between the Ottomans*.

<sup>360</sup> Movses Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan.”

<sup>361</sup> *Al-Mirsad*, August 7, 1928, (N: 27) cited in Movses Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Kernank Chezok mnak?,” (b), *Husaber*, December 18, 1928, 2.

were against the mandate provisions.<sup>362</sup> The nationalists, however, insisted on either having their version ratified or not having any Constitution at all.<sup>363</sup>

As can be imagined, these discussions took place in a heated atmosphere. The French-orchestrated initiative to reject the draft Constitution or insert a new article had failed. Nevertheless, discussions continued over the next few days with fervent speeches for or against the French proposal. Among the deputies in favor of the French proposition, there were two deputies from Alexandretta – Karas Mursel Zade of Turkish origin and Movses Ter-Galustian of Armenian origin. Using this opportunity, Mursel Zade also demanded complete independence for the Sanjak.<sup>364</sup> A few days later, during another session, Ahmed bey from Kirik Khan made a similar demand, speaking in Turkish. Izzeddin bey, the Alawi deputy from Antioch, in his turn, demanded the financial and administrative autonomy of the Sanjak within Syria, insisting on a special status supported by the Constitution. Ter-Galustian, in his turn, defended the demands of the other deputies of Alexandretta, declaring that the Sanjak would not cede its rights, referring to its special administrative status.<sup>365</sup> His speech was soon interpreted as calls for the independence of Alexandretta and provided the spark. Although numerous petitions arrived from Antioch denouncing the separatist claims of their deputies, it did little to calm the emotions in the capital.<sup>366</sup> The new anti-Armenian discourse was ensured. In addition to the widespread accusations that the newly arrived Armenians had participated in the elections and significantly impacted the outcome, now they were accused of having separatist aspirations.

Inevitably, all the Armenians were furious with Ter-Galustian. *Yeprat* stated that “Armenians were still not ready for politics... It was well known to everyone that Syrian nationalists demanded unity, including Lebanon. The demands of several deputies of Alexandretta were entirely untimely and misplaced. Moreover, the Sanjak had its Muslim deputies; why did the Armenian deputy have to join them publicly? Did not he know about the

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<sup>362</sup> These were articles 2, 73, 74, 75, 110, 112, which insisted on the Syrian unity including Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan; right to conclude treaties, foreign policy, organize a Syrian army, and proclamation of martial law. These were precisely the points the French had asked to refrain from putting in the constitution and were to be solved during the treaty negotiations. see Hadad, *Fifty Years*, 80; Shambrook, 20.

<sup>363</sup> The Syrian draft Constitution was greatly inspired by the Iraqi Constitution that contained all the problematic provisions just making a reference to the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1922, which safeguarded the British interests and the mandate. In doing so, it appeared to be progressive, the result of a liberal policy.

<sup>364</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune Siriayi ev Libanani Azgayin-Azatagrakan Sharjunnerin* [The Participation of the Armenians in the National Liberation Movement in Syria and Lebanon], (Yerevan, 1968), 54.

<sup>365</sup> “Sahmandir Joghovo Huzumnalits Mek Niste (13rd)” [The Turbulent Session of the Assembly], *Yeprat*, August 18, 1928, 3.

<sup>366</sup> “Antioक्सinere Erespokhannerun Hakarak” [The People of Antioch Against the Deputies], *Yeprat*, August 18, 1928, 3.

attitude of the nationalists regarding the Sanjak?"<sup>367</sup> Ter-Galustian gave numerous explanations for his speech, explaining in effect that he did not demand the independence of the Sanjak. He said that he had only supported Izzedin's demand regarding a special status within Syria and pointed out that such a demand had previously been put forward by all Sanjak deputies and was included in the Constitution.<sup>368</sup>

Just as the demands of the Alepines for the independence of Aleppo were blamed on the Armenians, now the same was happening with regard to Alexandretta. What followed next was an organized anti-Armenian press campaign. The main theme in these articles revolved around the idea that Armenians had *duties* in Syria. They could not remain neutral in Syrian politics and pretend to be foreigners; instead, they were expected to join the Syrian national struggle for independence.

They (Armenians) have their own workshops, farms, schools, clubs; they teach at the universities, work in the hospitals but when it comes to their *duties*, they prefer to remain *guests* and not be involved in important national affairs. They prefer to have Syrian and Lebanese *passports in their pockets and enjoy equal rights without fulfilling any citizen duties*. Instead, they enjoy Western privileges that prevent the free future of our country from the West. We do not need this kind of French and Armenian politics to create a dangerous future for us. Among us there is an *Armenian community who became Syrian and they have a duty to support us in our struggle for independence*.<sup>369</sup>

In Part I of this dissertation, we saw how Turkish propaganda attempted to portray the Armenian refugees as the only group who sustained the unwanted French mandate. From the *Al-Sha'b's* article, we can safely assume that these efforts were largely successful. We shall observe the same trend elsewhere in this dissertation, especially in Part IV, when the link between Turkish propaganda and the Syrian nationalist press becomes more apparent.

The other interesting feature of *Al-Sha'b's* article is its mention of "citizen duties," a reminder to the Armenian refugees-turned-citizens that their new status entailed *duties*. It was an open instruction to fulfill these duties, to be active politically and *not restrain* from political participation. Thus, the Syrian nationalists were not against Armenian political participation *per se* but insisted that it should be the "right" participation.

Notably, the Armenian refugee community did not have a common strategy. The discourse of neutrality was propagated by the Henchaks and Ramkavars but not shared by the

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<sup>367</sup> Sisak, "Irakanutyun Luysin Tak: Kaghakanutyune ev Kaghakagete" [In the Light of the Truth: The Politics and the Politician], *Yeprat*, August 29, 1928, 1.

<sup>368</sup>"Antioke Erespokhani Jeshtume" [The Explanations of the Deputy of Antioch), *Yeprat*, September 22, 1928, 1; *Arev*, October 2, 1928, 2.

<sup>369</sup> "Wājibāt al-ārman fi al-bilād: wa 'ithān nurīd minhim" [Duties of the Armenians in the Country: What Do We Demand?], *Al-Sha'b*, October 5, 1928, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

ARF.<sup>370</sup> The article series penned by Movses Ter-Galustian and published in the ARF organ of Cairo, *Husaber*, under the title “Syrian national movement and our position: Can we remain neutral?” contained reflections on these accusations and the ARF response. Ter-Galustian agreed with *Al-Sha‘b* that Armenians could not remain neutral. He also criticized the Armenian circles (Henchaks and Ramkavars) who promoted neutrality. How was neutrality possible if the Armenians were equal citizens and, according to the law, entitled to participate in the elections and be elected to the state administration? He did not omit to mention that all these rights were acquired under the Lausanne Treaty – an international treaty that neither the Armenians, the French, nor the Syrians could ignore. Moreover, exercising their full citizen rights and claiming neutrality during the crises was impossible.

Is there any benefit from pretending to be a foreign, a temporary element (*antsord, otar ev khort tarr*)? Never. I have always insisted and still do, there are *no Armenian refugees* in Syria, there are *Syrian Armenians*, who are the citizens of this country with the same rights as the locals. We must make it clear to the natives, to accept it for once and all... And in order for it to happen, we must stop considering ourselves foreigners and behaving as foreigners. Instead, we must continue to serve the development of this country with *honesty and loyalty and in cooperation with both the local and the French authorities*.<sup>371</sup>

He then highlighted that this had been the approach of all the Armenian deputies who had arrived in Damascus to participate in the Assembly. Moreover, the Armenian deputies had tried to win the nationalists’ sympathy by actively participating in the diverse working groups they organized and voting in favor of their projects. Regardless of these efforts, most of the nationalist deputies continued to view the presence of the Armenian deputies with hostility. Moreover, all three Armenian deputies were native to Syria – they were born and raised there. One of them, Nicola Janji, not only had an Arabic name and spoke Arabic as his native tongue, but he had also run on the nationalists’ list.<sup>372</sup> How was it possible to be more native than that? While Ter-Galustian himself had fought beside Syrians and Armenians for the liberation of their homeland (Syria, in the WWI years). Regardless of these efforts, Syrian nationalists had decided on their attitude toward the Armenians without bothering to understand their position. What was left for the Armenians to do?<sup>373</sup>

Thus, the first article concluded with a provocative question that the author would elaborate upon in his subsequent articles. As he explained, Syrians were not just against the

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<sup>370</sup> Some of this discourse is documented in Victoria Abrahamyan, “Citizen Strangers.”

<sup>371</sup> Movses Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Kernank Chezok Mnak?,” (a). (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

Armenian political position but against the Armenian presence! Similar interests are required to bring different nations together. The Syrian nationalists considered the presence of a strong and well-off Armenian colony to be against their interests – this was the critical point. Syrian hatred of the Armenians increased as the economic conditions of the latter improved.

Ter-Galustian tied the origins of the anti-Armenian rhetoric to the settlement of a few Armenian families in Damascus. Many newspapers, including *Al-Sha‘b*, had been explicit about it. Furthermore, *Alef Ba’*, another nationalist newspaper from Damascus, published subsequent articles titled “The settlement of the Armenians in Syria is a great danger that we need to fight with all our forces.” These lengthy articles described the Syrian struggle against the evils of the mandate, comparing it with the situation in Iraq and Palestine. It was evident that Palestinians had to fight against two evils: the British mandate and the Zionists, who strived to establish a Jewish “national home” there. While Palestinians envied the Syrians and Iraqis, who had just one evil to fight, the situation was rapidly changing in Syria, too. *Alef Ba’* employed black humor, declaring that now, it was the turn of the Syrians to envy the Palestinians because although the former still had two evils to fight, the danger to the Syrians was much greater. While the settlement politics of both powers (Great Britain and France) were similar – to retain the mandate, Jewish settlements were less dangerous, for Jews arrived because of their desire to die in the Promised Land. On the other hand, Syrians had to face the Armenians, who were there because of their national interests, with their trade skills and the desire to succeed in many fields. After referring to the dangerous cooperation between the French, local authorities, and the LoN to settle the Armenians, *Alef Ba’* concluded: “We are a weak nation and cannot stand against the Armenians famous for their resilience.”<sup>374</sup> This opinion was reflected in other Syrian newspapers.

Ter-Galustian revealed that anti-Armenian rhetoric had been so strong that the Armenian deputies had been obliged to ask their Syrian counterparts to interfere. However, because this action did not produce any results, they were compelled to ask for assistance from Ponsot. This intervention, in turn, not only did not produce the desired results but further damaged their relations with the nationalists.<sup>375</sup> It was not the first time that Armenians had asked for French interference to settle their issues with the Syrians, and it was known that the Syrians disliked this behavior. What is more, it seemed that representations by the Armenian

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<sup>374</sup> “The Settlement of the Armenians in Syria is a Great Danger that We Need to Fight with all Our Forces,” *Alef Ba’* July 21, 1929, N: 2285, cited in Movses Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke,” (b).

<sup>375</sup> Movses Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke,” (b).



communists to the Syrian nationalists through Khaled Bekdash, the future leader of the Syrian communist party, gave better results, as testified proudly by Topuzyan.<sup>376</sup>

In his last few articles, Ter-Galustian analyzed the core reasons behind such anti-Armenian discourse. He differentiated several factors: economic, political, religious, social, and Turkish influence.<sup>377</sup> In terms of economy, he identified Syria as a poor and backward country, which was isolated and cut off from its traditional markets. Moreover, its populations, especially the Muslims, were less entrepreneurial and easily happy with the minimum without striving to expand their activities. According to Ter-Galustian, it would only be possible to develop Syria with the help of the mandate, but ironically the Syrians were against it. In this light, the Armenian spirit to work hard and succeed was badly regarded. He quoted another Armenian paper from Istanbul that correctly captured the essence of the anti-Armenian discourse. The irony was that Syrians were happy to have starving Armenian refugees in their country but were against having hardworking Armenians, whose economic conditions had improved, which was undoubtedly also good for Syria.<sup>378</sup>

As for the political reasons, they were numerous. First, there was the fact that Syria was now a state and, like other newly created nation-states, it had nationalist, even extremist aspirations. For example, the Syrians wished to create a larger pan-Arabic state. In this regard, many nationalist leaders denied the rights of national and ethnic minorities because of the belief that granting such rights would create internal issues. According to Ter-Galustian, this was why many press articles railed against the intention of several deputies to include sentences about the protection of minorities in the constitution, albeit in vague terms. Indeed, many articles referred directly to the Armenians and the Circassians as two ethnic communities who were resilient and insisted on keeping their language and other national characteristics.<sup>379</sup> Thus, religious fanaticism was one of the reasons for the anti-Armenian rhetoric. Coupled with this was a hatred of the Armenian attraction to Western civilization and their wish to spread it in the East. Finally, there was the Turkish influence, which could not be ignored. Turkey was against the concentration of the Armenians in Syria, their proximity to Cilicia, and the improvement in their conditions. It had many agents disseminating anti-Armenian rhetoric to turn the Syrians against the Armenians. All this obliged the Armenians to look for other

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<sup>376</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune*, 57.

<sup>377</sup> Movses Ter-Galustian, "Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Hakahay Tramadrutyunnerun Patjarnere" [Syrian Nationalist Movement and Our Position: The Main Causes of the Anti-Armenian Discourse], c, *Husaber*, December 19, 1928, 1-2.

<sup>378</sup> *Azdarar*, October 13, 1928, N: 579, cited in *Ibid*.

<sup>379</sup> M. Ter-Galustian, "Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Hakahay Tramadrutyunnerun," C.

alliances to help them survive. Fortunately, not all Syrians were nationalists, and there was a growing circle of moderates who were much more sympathetic toward the French mandatory authorities and the “minorities” of Syria.<sup>380</sup>

Interestingly, although Ter-Galustian tried hard to analyze the root causes of the anti-Armenian rhetoric and considered myriad reasons, he failed to see the trap that made any reconciliation with the nationalists impossible.<sup>381</sup> It was obvious whom Ter-Galustian and his political party, the ARF, were inclined to cooperate with, and they were not the nationalists. Moreover, Ter-Galustian was soon employing the same vocabulary as the French mandatory in describing the nationalists – extremist nationalists (*tsayrahegh azgaynakan*). For Ter-Galustian, the National Bloc was not a proper party with a clear program. Moreover, not everyone who adhered to it had the same political convictions. Instead, he believed they had regrouped due to personal interests and the desire to occupy higher positions. He even went as far as to adopt the same vocabulary as the French vis-à-vis the problematic articles of the constitution (Articles 2, 73, 74, 75, 110, and 112), considering them foolish and lacking “political ripeness and experience.”<sup>382</sup> Moreover, he quoted *Le Temps* (October 22, 1928) and even the session of the LoN (June 26, 1928) to show how illogical and unconstructive the Syrian nationalists were in demanding Syrian unity within the country’s geographical borders, which would ultimately bring them in conflict with all the neighboring countries.<sup>383</sup> Nationalists had two options: to reconcile with the mandatory authorities opting for cooperation or insist on their unconstructive demands. Either way, they faced an impasse; if they opted for reconciliation, it would be an easy but temporary success, for they would soon lose their *raison d’être*; then what would be the difference between them and the pro-governmental, pro-French forces? If they insisted on their demands, they would distort the peace and endanger the future of Syria. The solution suggested by Ter-Galustian was the position of the moderate nationalists.<sup>384</sup> His last article was, therefore, devoted to this category. The main slogan of the so-called moderate nationalists was “Syria for the Syrians regardless of religion,” leaving aside pan-Arabist and pan-Islamist goals. Their declarations of no discrimination between the different religious and ethnic “minorities” who were together to build a unified *Syrian nation* had been appealing to the ARF deputy. Moreover, moderate nationalists were against open hostility with France for, before demanding

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> ARF would reconcile with the National Bloc in 1936, as shown in Part IV.

<sup>382</sup> M. Ter-Galustian, “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Watani Kusaktsutyune ev Ir Apagan” [Syrian Nationalist Movement and Our Position: Watani Party and its Future], (d), *Husaber*, January 3, 4, 1929, 1.

<sup>383</sup> More on the publication of *Le Temps* and discussions in Paris on the controversial articles of the Constitution see in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*.

<sup>384</sup> M. Ter-Galustian, , “Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Watani Kusaktsutyune ev Ir Apagan,” (d).

any political autonomy, there was a need for economic development and financial autonomy. This moderate tone, the inclusive concept of building the Syrian state together with everyone who considered himself a Syrian, and their unwillingness to confront the French or create divisions in the society, were the main reasons why many Syrians, as well as “minorities” (including Alawite, Kurd, Circassian, and Christian), had joined their ranks.<sup>385</sup>

The cultivation of moderate nationalists by fragmenting the ranks of the National Bloc had, indeed, been a priority for Ponsot, as explained by Shambrook.<sup>386</sup> The French authorities had successfully created an image for these “moderates” as the only ones who wished to create an inclusive Syrian state with the participation of all the religious and ethnic minorities. From the articles of Ter-Galestian, it becomes clear that the French had largely succeeded in their task.

Unsurprisingly, these ideas were not shared by the Henschaks and the Ramkavars; the latter called for neutrality where possible and an alliance with the Syrian nationalists. This divide would manifest itself more concretely and sharply during the Syrian Revolt and at the end of the 1920s, as we shall observe in Parts III and IV of this dissertation. Since both blocs also had powerful external players, no reconciliations and no single Armenian strategy would be possible.

## **Conclusions**

Part II was devoted to the first major instance of anti-Armenian discourse in Syria after the granting of citizenship and voting rights. It also reflected on questions of identity and belonging and showed the multiplicity of discourses among the Syrians and Armenians. It revealed how the discourse of Syrian nationalists in Damascus was radically different from that of the Alepines, who were in daily contact with the refugees. The Alepines strove to find constructive and mutually beneficial solutions to the refugee issue, while the Damascenes were primarily preoccupied with Syrian unity and ascribed autonomist aspirations to the refugees.

This Part showed the circumstances under which citizenship was awarded to the Armenian refugees and how the Aleppo delegation comprising the most distinguished notables had been behind the suggestion to “nationalize” the refugees in the first place. The integration of this fact, not known until today, is of utmost importance to nuance our understanding of the relations between the Muslim hosts and the incoming Christian refugees. It will help us go

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<sup>385</sup> M. Ter-Galustian, ‘Sirayi Azgayanakan Sharjume ev Mer Dirke: Chapavor Azgaynakannere’ [Syrian Nationalist Movement and Our Position: The Moderate Nationalists], (e), January 17, 1929, 1.

<sup>386</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 44.

beyond the binary depiction of these relations, for example, the assumption of a standard hostile attitude on the part of the Muslims toward the incoming Christians or a “natural” alliance between the Christian refugees and the French mandatory power. The opposition of most refugees to the citizenship opportunity is another balancing fact. The reflections of the refugees and their leaders on how to reconcile “Armenianness” – the national identity – with the new citizenship show that it was not a simple decision. However, it became the only choice in the light of the forced dispossession in Greece and the inability of the refugees to leave for elsewhere (Soviet Armenia or abroad). By accepting citizenship, most refugees and their leaders hoped to avoid deportation and be compensated for their properties in Turkey as per French promises. They did not become citizens to have the right to participate in the local elections. For the Armenian political parties, however, this right offered an opportunity.

By zooming in on the elections and the Armenian participation, it became clear that the “great Armenian impact” on the vote outcome was more imaginary than real. The community was highly segmented and incapable of choosing any “official” candidates to represent them, let alone coordinate their votes for certain individuals believed to be pro-mandate candidates. While ARF and its supporters were manifestly pro-mandate, this was not the case for the Henschaks and Ramkavars. We have shown that the anti-Armenian discourse in 1928 was about the constitutional crises and the declarations of the ARF candidate and not directly related to the elections.

Finally, we have attempted to show that the term “Armenians,” which placed the entire Armenian community of Syria into a single category, is wrong and misleading. This was a highly segmented community where multiple political bodies and institutions competed for leadership. Although local citizenship helped overcome the internal distinction between the refugee and non-refugee Armenians, a homogenous community was never achieved. Eventually, refugees and their leaders were divided into two opposite ideological blocs whose conciliation was not possible because each gained a powerful external player. The ARF leading members who were exiled after the Sovietization of Armenia did not wish to lose their authority and were soon allied with the French mandatory authorities. Henschaks and Ramkavars, on the other hand, allied with the communists and other pro-Soviet Armenian forces. The competition between these sides would only increase, as we shall witness in the next chapters.

### **Part III: Loyalty at stake: the Syrian Revolt and its aftermath**

Part III examines the Syrian Revolt and the Armenian participation in it. After the granting of citizenship, this was the second contentious period when a major anti-Armenian discourse was underway, accusing Armenian refugees of having collaborated with the French mandatory power. Once again, *all* the Armenian refugees were portrayed as hostile to the Syrians and collaborators with the French.

Since Soviet efforts to establish communist cells in the Middle East and their claim of authority over the Armenian refugees coincided with the Revolt that broke out in Syria in July 1925, we have studied them together. Therefore, this chapter aims to analyze the interplay between the formation of the communist movements in Syria and Lebanon and the events unleashed during the Syrian Revolt. The latter offers an excellent window for studying not only the communist and Armenian participation but also the internal dynamics of the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party in its formative years. Contrary to well-established narratives, I argue that there are more ties between the communist movement in Syria and Lebanon and the Syrian Revolt than current historiography has established. First, it was because of the Revolt that Soviet initial efforts to form a Communist Party failed; the communist leaders were imprisoned shortly after the first party congress and condemned to death not for being communists but for their support to the Revolt. At the same time, it was due to the Revolt that the Communist Party obtained the necessary political ground, for the party's first public statement came in relation to the Revolt.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it was the Revolt that marked a turning point in the Arab-Armenian as well as the French-Armenian relations after a decisive event – the attack on the Armenian refugee camp of Damascus. Since the activities of the Armenian communists were closely tied to those of the local communists from the very beginning, it also shows that not *all* Armenians were pro-French, not even during this major upheaval. It will also demonstrate how some of the major accusations against the Armenians were put forward by the rival Armenian bloc. This was not an isolated case, and we shall observe the same phenomenon in the later chapters. We will see that the rivalry between two Armenian opposing blocs, and *not* the anti-Armenian discourse or sentiments of the Syrians, was the main reason that all the Armenian refugees were depicted in a way that is still predominant in Western historiography.

Why to study the Revolt and the Formation of Communist Party together?

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<sup>1</sup> Sana Tannoury-Karam, "Not Monolithic: Reflections on the Communist International in the Levant," in Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, July 2019, <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/40819/not-monolithic> (accessed on August 10, 2022)

The Revolt quickly became a nationwide struggle against French rule and lasted for two whole years. Unsurprisingly, the Revolt was immediately conceived by the Soviet authorities as “an event of great importance with *international meaning*, because it happened... when the last revolutions were over in the West,” as was explained by the prominent Soviet orientalist Lutskiy.<sup>2</sup>

Communist historiography would later claim a *great role* in the Revolt.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Armenians made up a majority in the Communist Party in Syria and Lebanon throughout the 1920s<sup>4</sup> raises a few questions. It does so, in particular, because of a controversial event that happened on October 18, 1925, the same day that Damascus was bombarded by the French forces in an attempt to contain the Revolt. On that day, one of the three Armenian refugee camps located in Damascus was attacked, leaving 50 dead. Most of the Western sources would later report this episode in one or two brief sentences, explaining that it happened to punish the Armenians who were recruited in large numbers by the French troops and participated in punitive actions against the Syrian rebels.<sup>5</sup> In other works, especially communist-orientated scholarship, including Russian and Armenian language works, this episode is not mentioned at all. This includes Russian orientalist Lutskiy’s detailed report that described the events leading to the bombardment of Damascus and surprisingly failed to mention anything about the attack

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<sup>2</sup> Lutskiy spent eight months in Palestine in 1924, returning Moscow in May 1925. As of 1926 he was teaching in the Oriental department in Moscow, see in N. S. Luchkaya, “Vladimir Lutskiy,” *Merdzavor ev Mijin Arevelki Erkerker ev Joghovurdner, Arabakan erkerker*, vol. 6 (Yerevan: Academy of Science, 1974), 413-435. Vladimir B. Lutskiy, “Natsionalnaya Revolutsia 1925-1927 v Sirii” [The National Revolution in Syria, 1925-1927], *Trody Instituta Vostokovedeniya, XXIV* (Moscow, Leningrad, 1937), 89. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>3</sup> N.H. Hovhannisyanyan and H.S. Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun Hamar Mghvats Paykarum* [Syria in the Struggle for Independence] (Yerevan, 1974); Hovhannes Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune Siryayi ev Libanani Azgayin-Azatagrakan Sharjumnerin* [The Participation of the Armenians in the National Liberation Movement in Syria and Lebanon] (Yerevan, 1968); V.B. Lutskiy, *Natsinal’no Osvoboditel’naya Voyna v Sirii, 1925-27* (Moscow: 1964).

<sup>4</sup> As late as 1928 Armenians were considered a majority in the party, presetting its 60%, see in Rossiiski Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii – RGASPI [Russian State Archives of Social and Political History], fond 495, list [opisi] 84, file [delo]15, page [list] 23, “Projet de résolution sur la situation en Syrie et les taches du P.C.S.” Septembre 22, 1928. We have not been able to consult the Russian archives in person. All the quotes from the Russian archives are as given in Kosach, *Kommunisti Blizhnego Vostoka v SSSR: 1920-1930-e Gody* [Communists of the Middle East in the USSR: 1920-1930s] (Moscow, RGGU, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth P. Maccallum, *The Nationalist Crusade in Syria* (New York: The Foreign Policy Association, 1928), 130, 134, 150, 151, 152; George Antonius, *Arab Awakening: The Story of the National Arab Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), 378 (French armed a large number of Armenians and Circassians and allowed them to rob and kill); Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 159; Albert H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay, 1915-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 188 (The revolt almost became a civil war between the rebels and the Armenians and Circassians armed by the French); George Haddad, *Fifty Years of Modern Syria and Lebanon* (Beirut: Dar al-Hayat, 1950), 76 (The activities of the Armenian and Circassian units armed by the French earned the hatred of the locals); Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 171, 191-192. Recent works include Seda Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land, and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915-1939),” (Unpublished diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 219, Michel Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005), 103, Laura Robson, *The Politics of Mass Violence in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford: University Press, 2020), 73. They all cite either Longrigg’s or Khoury’s accounts.

on the Armenian camp.<sup>6</sup> In his book, published 39 years after these events, he did include a small paragraph on the Armenian camp incident stating that the French tried unsuccessfully to incite the massacres of the Armenian refugees and other Christian inhabitants of Damascus.<sup>7</sup>

The same is true for the memoir of Harutyun Madoyan, one of the founding members of the Syrian Communist Party. He, too, failed to mention anything about the attack. Instead, the event is referred to as a *misunderstanding*.<sup>8</sup> In another article written by Madoyan years later, he referred to it as an “unfortunate incident,” putting the entire blame on the ARF members, and other “pro-ARF adventurous and politically backward indolent people.”<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Armenian historian Topuzyan’s work is an exception in this regard. He devoted a whole chapter to his two books.<sup>10</sup>

Another controversy arises from the fact that Armenian language sources vehemently deny that any Armenian volunteers participated in punitive actions.<sup>11</sup> These Armenian sources, understandably, are less known and less accessible to Western scholars because of the language barrier. As a result, Armenian participation in the Revolt has remained understudied and wrongly portrayed in Western scholarship until today.

While the full story of the USSR’s involvement in the Syrian Revolt has yet to be told, Part III reveals the Armenian participation. It aims to respond to the following questions: who were the communists in Syria and Lebanon? Were the Armenians acting as Soviet agents? Was the alliance between them natural? Were Armenians more prone to communist ideology compared to their Arab counterparts? What were the main driving factors for the Armenians (and Arabs) to adopt communist ideology? Was there communist interference in the Syrian Revolt or the “National Revolution” – as the Soviets called it? Did the Armenians participate in the Revolt, and what were the roles played by the diverse Armenian communities? By answering these questions, Part III will showcase the local, national, and global dimensions of the Revolt and the communist movements.

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<sup>6</sup> V.B. Lutskiy, *Natsional’no Osvoboditel’naya Voyna v Sirii (1925-1927)* (Moscow, 1964), 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

<sup>8</sup> “In order to Repair Misunderstandings, Arabic language leaflets were distributed,” *Yerevan*, May 26, 1926. Harutyun Madoyan, *Hayat ‘Ala al-Mitras* [A life on the Barricades] (Beirut, 1986); Madoyan, *Kyank me Patneshi Vra, Husher ev V kayutyunner* (Beirut, 1988)

<sup>9</sup> H. Madoyan, “Hay Kaghakakan Mtki Kazmavorumn u Hasunutyune ev Komunisteru Dere Arabakan Arevelki Mej” [Development and Maturation of the Armenian Political Thought: The Role of the Communists in the Arabic East] *Mer Nshrabanne e Araj*, January 4, 1959, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani Haykakan Gaghtojakhneri Patmutyun (1841-1946)* [History of Armenian Communities in Syria and Lebanon (1841-1946)] (Yerevan 1986), 220-233; Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*.

<sup>11</sup> Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Zhamanakakits Patmutyun Katoghikosutean Hayots Kilikio 1914-1972* [The Contemporary History of the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, 1914-1972] (Antelias 1975;); Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani*; Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*.

In doing so, it aims to fill this gap with a nuanced approach and the use of a new corpus of literature. We have made extensive use of the Armenian and Russian communist archives and other communist sources.<sup>12</sup> The memoir of Artin Madoyan<sup>13</sup> (one of the founders of both the Armenian and Syrian-Lebanese communist parties), has been central, too.<sup>14</sup> Madoyan was the author of numerous anti-French leaflets distributed during the Revolt. His memoir differs from other communist works claiming a *great communist role* in that he mentions only a modest role, mainly comprising propaganda and provision of medicine.<sup>15</sup> We have also consulted the ARF archives, which have never been used before. In addition, we have consulted French, British, and American archives as well as the Armenian and Arabic language press.

In the second part, we examine the aftermath of the Revolt, the Turkish factor, and the sponsored international fact-finding mission to Syria that laid the foundations of a large-scale refugee settlement scheme in Syria. We will reveal how two concurrent settlement schemes increasingly became intertwined and how the Syrian Jazira emerged as a major refugee settlement site.

## **Chapter I: The Communists and the Syrian Revolt**

Chapter I presents the creation of the first communist cells in Syria and Lebanon, among the locals as well as the Armenian refugees. It shows why this new ideology appealed to them in the first place and how the Armenian and Syrian-Lebanese communist cells became intertwined. We will also show the initial efforts of the USSR to support the rebels in Syria.

### **“The needle turns to the East”**

Both the communist movements in Syria and Lebanon and the Syrian Revolt have been studied, albeit separately. The connection between the two has been largely overlooked. The formation of communist and leftist movements in interwar Syria and Lebanon has received much scholarly attention from both Arab and Western researchers, who have studied the issue

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<sup>12</sup> Lutskiy, “Natsionalnaya Revolutsia;” Lutskiy, *Novaya Istoriya Arabskikh Stran* [Modern History of the Arab Countries] (Moscow, 1966); Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani*; Topuzyan, *Hayeri*; Hovhannisyan et al., *Sirian*.

<sup>13</sup> Madoyan was born on April 10, 1904, in Adana, in a family of a shoemaker. He and his family survived the Adana massacres of 1908. After WWI, he was sent to study in Istanbul where he was first introduced to communism through a teacher who came from Soviet Armenia. Later he joined his family in Beirut who had fled after the ceding of Cilicia and continued his studies in Beirut at the French medical school before being expelled on the grounds of his political activities.

<sup>14</sup> Madoyan, *Hayat 'Ala al-Mitras*; Madoyan, *Kyank me*.

<sup>15</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 85



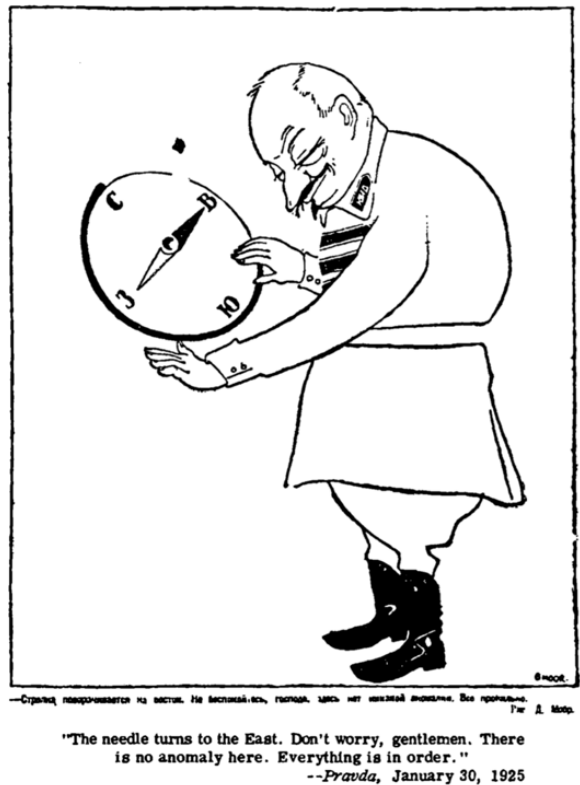


Figure 10. I. Spector, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim World* (Washington, 1958), 183.

from different perspectives.<sup>16</sup> Abdullah Hanna, for one, has studied Marxist progressive currents separate from the Communist Party in his works.<sup>17</sup> Most other works and memories on the formation of the Communist Party in Syria and Lebanon mention the early formative years only in passing, concentrating their main focus on the 1930s when the party was revitalized. At that time, the link between the party and the trade unions was more visible thanks to the numerous strikes they organized.<sup>18</sup> Other works focus on the party's antifascist activities during

<sup>16</sup> The history of the Communist Party of Syria was written by the late communist member Muhammad Dakrub for the first time, *Judhur al-Sindiyyana al-Hamra': Hikayat Nushu' al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-Lubnani, 1924-1931* [The Roots of the Red Oak: The Story of the Foundation of the Communist Party of Lebanon], (Beirut, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah Hanna, *Al-Haraka al-'Ummaliyya fi Suriya wa-Lubnan, 1900-1945*, [The Workers' Movement in Syria and Lebanon, 1900-1945] (Damascus, 1973); Abdullah Hanna, *Al-Haraka al-Shuyu'iyya al-Suriyya: al-Su'ud wa-l-Hubut: Dirasa Tajma'u bayna al-Tarikh al-Shafahi wa-al-Tarikh al-Maktub* (Damascus, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> S. Ayub, *Al-Hizb al-Shuriy fi Suriya wa Lubnan, 1922-1955* [The Communist Party in Syria and Lebanon]; Jacques Couland, *Le Mouvement Syndical au Liban, 1919-1946: Son évolution pendant le mandat français de l'occupation à l'évacuation et au Code du travail* (Paris, 1970).

the Second World War, and the USSR's relations with the Arab countries through the lens of the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> The memoirs of party founding members have also been published.<sup>20</sup>

Recently, communist movements in the Middle East and the USSR policies have received renewed interest. The Soviet Union's approach toward "the East" has been studied, and the role of the Soviet universities in educating new cadres has been revealed.<sup>21</sup> Other scholars have emphasized the significance of microhistory in writing global intellectual history by presenting the internationalist currents of the nationalists and the influence of separate individuals and intellectuals in cultivating the leftist milieu.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, several scholars have sought to capture the ethnic composition and the minority-dominated aspect of the early communist parties in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, the works of Ter Minassian and Kosach are complementary. Ter Minassian, for one, attributed a substantial role to the minority communities in the Middle East in disseminating communist propaganda, connecting it with the fact that many of these groups shared the same ethnicity with different nationalities in the USSR (Armenians, Jews, Azeris, Kurds).<sup>24</sup> In doing so, Ter Minassian has implied that these minorities were, in a sense, *natural* and *preselected* allies for the USSR. Her argument stems from her comparative study of Iran (where Azeris played important roles), Syria and Lebanon (Armenians, later the head of the party was a Kurd), Palestine (Jews), and Egypt (Jews, Syrian-Lebanese émigré).<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, Kosach, basing his book on the communist archives and recently released personal files of the USSR's former agents in the Middle East, shows that

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (New York, Routledge, 1957); Ivar Spector, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim World* (Washington, University of Washington Press, 1958); Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Tareq Y. Ismael; Jacqueline S. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (University Press of Florida, 1998). An exception is Ivar Spector's work that treats the formation of the communist movements in the Middle East from the beginning situating it in a larger geopolitical context.

<sup>20</sup> Fuad al-Shamali, *Asas al-Harakat al-Shuyu'iyya fi al-Bilad al-Suriyya al-Lubnaniyya* [The Foundation of the Communist Movements in Syria and Lebanon] (Beirut: Matba'at al-Fawa'id, 1935); Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbik, *Hikayat Awwal Nawwar fi al-'Alam wa fi Lubnan: Dhikrayat wa-Tariikh wa-Nusus* [The Story of May 1<sup>st</sup> in the World and in Lebanon: Memoirs, History, and Documents] (Beirut, 1974); Madoyan, *Kyank me*.

<sup>21</sup> Merav Mack, "Orthodox and Communist: A History of a Christian Community in Mandate Palestine and Israel," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42:4, (2015), 384–400; Masha Kirasirova, "The 'East' as a Category of Bolshevik Ideology and Comintern Administration: The Arab Section of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East," *Kritika* 18:1 (2017), 7–34; Laura Feliu and Ferran Izquierdo-Brichs, *Communist Parties in the Middle East: 100 Years of History* (New York, Routledge, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, 2013); Sana Tannoury Karam, "The Making of a Leftist Milieu: Anti-Colonialism, Anti-fascism, and the Political Engagement of Intellectuals in Mandate Lebanon, 1920- 1948," (Unpublished PhD diss., Massachusetts, Northeastern University Boston, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern: l'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris, les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997); Kosach, *Komunisti*.

<sup>24</sup> Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs*, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Ter Minassian's above mentioned book as well as her unpublished PhD dissertation, entitled "La politique soviétique au Moyen-Orient et les minorités du début des années 20 jusqu'à la veille de la Guerre Froide" (Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 1995).

Moscow aimed to target the natives from the start and turned to minorities to fill in the gaps.<sup>26</sup> He concluded that the ideologies and activities of the chosen Soviet agents, as well as their personal attitudes toward the USSR, largely shaped Soviet policies. Hence, those agents and communist parties were not passive branches solely executing orders from the center; instead, they were active in shaping the Soviet policies locally.<sup>27</sup> Both works discuss the role of Soviet education and diverse institutions in recruiting and cultivating new members. Neither study focuses on Syria and Lebanon alone; instead, they cover the entire Middle East. Both authors mention the Syrian Revolt only passing. Any comprehensive work on the URRS's involvement in the Revolt has still to be written.

On December 7, 1917, almost immediately after coming to power, the Bolsheviks issued an Appeal to the "Toiling Muslims of the East," calling on them to "overthrow the imperialist robbers and enslavers" of their countries.<sup>28</sup> Shortly after that, in March 1919, representatives of 21 countries elected the Third International (also known as the Comintern). The latter soon adopted an ambitious plan to support all the anti-colonial resistance around the world by linking communist activities in different countries with Moscow.<sup>29</sup> A few months after the formation of the Comintern, on November 22 of the same year, Lenin addressed the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East,<sup>30</sup> where he claimed the need to awaken the East.<sup>31</sup> The "East," "a flexible and vague concept," as shown by Masha Kirasirova, "accommodated both the revolutionary domestic programs on the national question and the world struggle for socialism."<sup>32</sup> The following year, the Comintern's Second Congress introduced the so-called "Soviet Eastern policy," while in September 1920, the Comintern-sponsored Congress of Peoples of the East took place in Baku, Azerbaijan.<sup>33</sup> The Congress was attended by 1,891 delegates including 235 Turks, 157 Armenians, three Arab, and eight Kurdish representatives.<sup>34</sup> It witnessed fervent speeches claiming the advance of the revolutionary

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<sup>26</sup> Kosach, *Komunisti*.

<sup>27</sup> Kosach, *Komunisti*, 25-26.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Bülent Gökay, "The Communist Party of Turkey: An Instrument of 'Soviet Eastern Policy?'," in *Communist Parties in the Middle East: 100 Years of History*, ed., Laura Feliu and Ferran Izquierdo-Brichs, (New York, Routledge, 2019), 61.

<sup>29</sup> Masha Kirasirova, "The 'East'," 7.

<sup>30</sup> The Congress was held in Moscow from November 22 to December 3, 1919 and was attended by 71 delegates with the right to vote and 11 delegates with voice but no right to vote.

<sup>31</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East," Moscow, November 22, 1919. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/nov/22.htm>, (accessed on August 10, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Masha Kirasirova, "The 'East,'" 9.

<sup>33</sup> Bülent Gökay, "The Communist Party of Turkey," 61.

<sup>34</sup> Of those attending, 1,273 were said to be Communists, 266 nonparty, 100 failed to indicate their affiliation, and 55 were women. In addition, some of the delegates representing the Muslim countries were already exiled in Soviet

movement converging towards the “great river of international revolutionary action against capitalism and imperialism.”<sup>35</sup> It included calls to the peasants of individual countries and regions. The one addressed to the Syrian peasants read:

Peasants of Syria and Arabia! The British and French promised you independence, but today their armies have occupied your country, they are dictating their laws to you, and you, after liberation from the Turkish Sultan and his government, have now been made slaves of the governments of Paris and London, which differ from the Sultan’s only in that they hold you down more firmly and plunder you more severely...<sup>36</sup>

Despite these calls and attention devoted to the East, the fight against capitalism was concentrated on the Western Front and on Germany, in particular, until 1923. Moreover, it was believed that thanks to the “immediate and unavoidable German revolution, it would be possible to achieve communism,” as stated in a directive sent to all party centers on September 26, 1923.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, all Soviet Republics were ordered to have their input, however modest, in ensuring this victory.<sup>38</sup>

Once it became clear, however, that no revolutions would happen anytime soon, either in Germany or elsewhere in the West, the whole attention of the Soviet authorities turned toward the East. The Middle East, in particular, emerged as an important stage since it was dominated by the same capitalist powers, France and Great Britain, against whom the Bolsheviks were fighting. The region, thus, offered an opportunity to confront these powers indirectly. It seemed enough to exploit the local discontent in a skillful way. Furthermore, it was believed that such indirect confrontation in the East would do more harm to the Western countries by distorting their markets and production chains and creating unemployment in Europe. This, in its turn, would create discontent among the workers, believed to be the first stage of the revolution and civil wars.<sup>39</sup>

Understandably, the USSR’s official policy towards the East was much more careful. It would not push communist propaganda overtly; instead, economic cooperation and trade partnership should be highlighted, as explained in a letter from Georgy Chicherin, the

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Russia, including Mustafa Subhi and Enver Pasha of Turkey, who did not appear in person before the Congress, see in Ivar Spector, *The Soviet Union*, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Rosa Velasco Munoz, “The Lebanese Communist Party,” in *Communist Parties in the Middle East*, 91-92.

<sup>36</sup> Sermons of the Congress, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/baku/cpe-baku-pearce.pdf> (Accessed on October 10, 2020)

<sup>37</sup> State archive of public-political information on Voronej region, fond 1, list 1, file 708, 1 cited in D.V. Redchenko, “G(eorgiy) V(asilevich) Chicherin and the Soviet Foreign Policy in the East,” *Press of Saratov University: History: International relations*, vol 9:1 (2009), 219.

<sup>38</sup> It is noteworthy that even the smallest republic of the USSR – Soviet Armenia, which was already flooded by half a million starving refugees was forced to send its financial contribution to help the German communists.

<sup>39</sup> E. Dumbadze, *Na Sluzbe Cheka I Comintern* [In the Service of Cheka and Comintern] (Paris, 1930), 132.

Commissar of Foreign Affairs, to the Soviet representative in Turkey, in 1923.<sup>40</sup> In order to spread its influence and propaganda, the USSR relied largely on Imperial Russia's widespread and long-standing Orthodox missionary presence. Compared to religious missions, communism was more flexible in the sense that it claimed to be supranational and supra-religious. It also made extensive use of other tools, such as diplomacy, international communist movements, and secret intelligence services.<sup>41</sup>

It was, nevertheless, not an easy task to infiltrate the Arab countries since the Middle East was tightly controlled by the French and the British. From the start, Turkey and Palestine were considered the most suitable entry points. In 1919, the Kemalist revolution was perceived in Russia as "the first Soviet revolution in Asia."<sup>42</sup> Turkey was also the first country to officially authorize the formation of a Communist Party in November 1920. In the aftermath of WWI, weakened Turkey was forced to seek Moscow's support due to the international isolation it shared with Moscow. Nevertheless, relations between the two were far from smooth. Turkey played a double game; on the one hand, it pretended to be pro-communist, receiving great financial aid from Moscow, and, on the other, systematically banned and executed the Turkish communists.<sup>43</sup> Moscow was well aware of this duplicity. However, the latter's desire to have Turkey on their side allowed them to overlook the double-dealing.<sup>44</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Communist Party in Turkey was short-lived, being dismissed in October 1922.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the Soviets remained committed to their "friendship" during the entire 1920s for two main reasons: Moscow's international isolation continued, and more importantly, Turkey continued to be a strategic platform from which the Soviets could try to infiltrate the neighboring Arab countries.<sup>46</sup>

Palestine was another base for disseminating communist propaganda to all other Arab countries through the Jewish emigrants who left for Palestine in large numbers. The situation there was also problematic for the Soviets. Strict British policies against the Palestinians, which

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<sup>40</sup> From Checherin to Rosenberg, May 24, 1923, cited in Redchenko, "G(eorgiy) V(asilevich) Checherin," 107.

<sup>41</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> On 28 January 1921, the founder of the Turkish Communist Party Mustafa Subhi along with other 14 Turkish communists were murdered in Trabzon. Russian authorities suspected that the ongoing persecution of the Turkish communists by Kemal was to please the European Powers, see in Spector, *The Soviet Union*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> The murder of the Turkish communists was not reported in Moscow until April, when a treaty of friendship was secured and duly signed with Turkey in March 1921. Gökyay, "The Communist Party of Turkey," 63-64.

<sup>45</sup> George S. Harris, *The Origins of Communism in Turkey* (Stanford, California, 1967).

<sup>46</sup> Georgi S. Aghabekov, *GPU, Zapiski Chekista* [The Notes of the Intelligence Worker] (Paris, 1930), 219.

even included banning the return of Palestinians with valid passports,<sup>47</sup> obliged the Soviets authorities to keep both platforms (Turkey and Palestine) open and functioning simultaneously.<sup>48</sup> In the early 1920s, Soviet authorities had successfully managed to send four agents to Haifa.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, through Istanbul and Haifa, the Soviet agents soon arrived in Beirut, Lebanon, and founded a Communist Party there. From the very start, the information flow formed a triangle, flowing from Haifa to Beirut and Istanbul before reaching Moscow.<sup>50</sup>

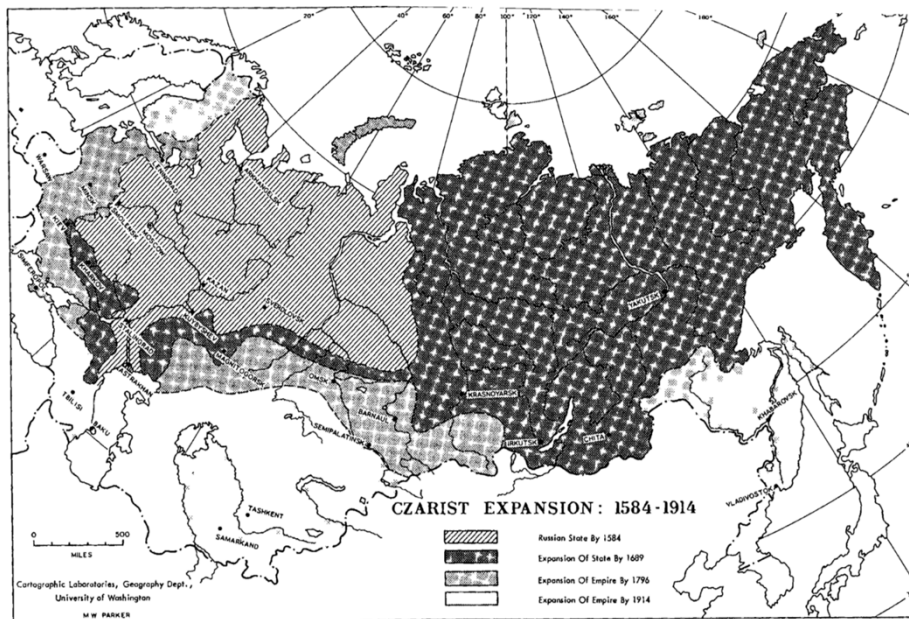


Figure 11. I. Spector, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim World*, 5

### Fomenting Communist cells in Syria: the awkward alliance

Today, it is common knowledge that communist ideology was attractive to many in Syria and Lebanon as a means to fight French and British rule. Nicolas Shau, a prominent Syrian-Lebanese communist leader, explained his motives for joining the Communist Party as follows:

Colonizers covered in all evil ways the map of the Arab world. The blame for this falls on the emirs, kings, and leaders who supported them by betraying our people and homeland. The key to the solution was Arab unity to fight for independence.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> More on this, see Lauren Banko, “Border Transgressions, Border Controls: Mobility along Palestine’s Northern Frontier, 1930-1946” in *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946*, ed., Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 256;

<sup>48</sup> Aghabekov, *GPU*, 208.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

<sup>50</sup> Aghabekov, *GPU*, 236.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, 15.

In fact, this was precisely where the Bolshevik and nationalist goals overlapped. Communists also incited people to fight against the foreign imperialists and the local bourgeoisie. Moreover, it was the USSR's wish to create a strong and united Arab state able to stand against the imperialist threat.<sup>52</sup>

The first Soviet agent, Joseph Berger, a writer for the *International Correspondent* and a member of the central committee of the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), arrived in Beirut in October 1924.<sup>53</sup> He met four persons, all of them Christians (Orthodox and Greek Catholics) and journalists. Yusuf Yuzbek, a future leading communist, was among them. During his October visit, Berger observed that nationalism was the main reason for these journalists to embrace communism.<sup>54</sup> They knew nothing about communist theories and praxis, and their sole preoccupation was the unity and independence of Syria. From Berger's report, it was clear that he was able to make full use of the journalistic skills of these men. As he explained, his task was not only to link the existing movements but also to create new cells. It would not have been possible without "certain Syrian newspapers" with 'socialist coloring' calling people to fight against the aristocrats and powerful capitalists."<sup>55</sup> One such leftist newspaper was *Al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh* (*The Errant Journalist*), published in Zahle by Iskander al-Riashi, who was influenced by the Egyptian Communist Party.<sup>56</sup> Its first edition (September 28, 1922) had announced intention to promote the friendship of different classes and respect the poor more than the rich... although defending the French mandate.<sup>57</sup> The newspaper quickly became an intellectual-dissident reference point,<sup>58</sup> limited, however, to a select Christian minority group, all of them of Lebanese origin.<sup>59</sup>

A young journalist who regularly wrote in this newspaper was the 20-year-old Yusuf Yuzbek. When Yuzbek published an article in October 1924 on the occasion of the death of Anatole France, he was immediately contacted by Berger, who was already in Beirut.<sup>60</sup> Yuzbek, much like his other similar-minded friends, sympathized with communist ideology only to pursue the nationalistic cause. In the Middle East, it turned out that the nationalists and

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<sup>52</sup> G. Aghabekov, *GPU*, 236.

<sup>53</sup> RGASPI, fond 495. List 84. File 8, 27, "Rapport du camarade Ichtyar au Secretariat de l'Orient," cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn 1, 155.

<sup>54</sup> RGASPI, fond 495. List 84. File 8, 6-10, "Au C.E. de l'I.C., Moscow, 1925. La fondation du Parti Communiste de Syrie," cited in *ibid*, fn. 2, 155.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>56</sup> More on this newspaper and other leftist newspapers and authors see in Karam, "The Making of a leftist milieu."

<sup>57</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> Other leftist newspapers published in Lebanon included *al-Ma'rad*, *al-Haqiqa*, see in *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>59</sup> Rosa Velasco Munoz, "The Lebanese Communist Party," 93.

<sup>60</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 60.

communists pursued the same goals, albeit by different means. “Both strived to achieve equal rights for their nations, the only difference being the terminology,” as Kosach explained, “communists replaced ‘nation’ with ‘proletariat,’ ‘workers’ and ‘peasants’.”<sup>61</sup> In the Syrian-Lebanese context, these words were not employed, nor was reference made to any communist principle, even in the declaration announcing the formation of the Communist Party:

We have founded a party under the name the Lebanese People’s Party with the aim of helping, by all possible means, to develop industry, agriculture, and trade in Lebanon, to propagate the spirits of fraternity among the Lebanese nation, to stop the clergy from using their influence at the expense of the public good, to support national schools and unify the secular education program, to bring together workers and farm workers in trade unions to defend their common interests, to use all our influence to make sure that capital and inheritance are duly taxed, to ensure that Waqf assets are viewed as national assets under the control of the government, and to promote women’s emancipation.<sup>62</sup>

It seems that the “communists” of Syria and Lebanon were also convinced that nationalism and communism were the same – a new way of fighting for one’s national cause. We can judge how well those “communists” were familiar with communist praxis or aware of its key turning points from an insight shared by Madoyan, “Yuzbek was a promising Bolshevik, even though he mixed up the dates of the October Revolution with the Comintern’s Third Congress.”<sup>63</sup> Yuzbek was also perfectly aware that he and his friends lacked knowledge of the ideology that they claimed to embrace:

Some of us have participated in the establishment of the first Arab-led Communist Party in the East. But was there anyone among us who scientifically and truly understood Marxism? Had any of us read Lenin? Or at least read his eternal directive study ‘What Is to Be Done?’<sup>64</sup>

Curiously, in the Middle East context, it seems that even the USSR shared this idea, or at least chose to tolerate it, at the same time waging a harsh war at home, pitilessly destroying anything and anyone associated with nationalism.<sup>65</sup>

These people might know nothing about the communist ideology but had mastered how to plead their cause in Moscow using the correct terminology. From the very start, there was only one experienced communist in Lebanon. This was Fuad Shimali, a Christian Maronite

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<sup>61</sup> Kosach, *Komunisti*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> “Movement syndicale en situation colonial : le cas du Liban,” *Le Mouvement Social*, N: 68 (July-September 1969), 57-76, 105.

<sup>63</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 58.

<sup>64</sup> Ismael & Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Rogers Brubaker argued that Soviet authorities instrumentalized nationalism at home while pretending to fight it, see in Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapter 2.



from Bikfaya (mountainous Lebanon). His short communist experience began in Egypt, but he had managed to be expelled from the party, returning to his birthplace in August 1923.<sup>66</sup> Upon his return, he immediately established the General Syndicate of Tobacco Workers (al-Naqaba al-‘amma li-‘Ummal al-Dukhkhan fi Lubnan) in Bikfayya, Lebanon, which included about 2,000 workers.<sup>67</sup> This syndicate later established contacts with other labor groups, including printing press workers, carpenters, cooks, drivers, and shoemakers, creating the Supreme Committee of Syndicates (al-Lajna al-Naqabiyya al-‘ulya), the first such organization in Lebanon.<sup>68</sup>

In the communist archives in Moscow, there is an appeal from him, “on behalf of oppressed working classes of Lebanon,” where he explains that the ultimate goal of their party<sup>69</sup> was the fight against the imperialists and the creation of an independent Lebanon.<sup>70</sup> While begging Moscow to support his party’s nationalist cause, he still managed to use the correct communist terminology for that purpose.

Shimali and Yuzbek met for the first time on October 24, 1924, during a meeting organized by Berger. During this meeting, it was decided to found a Communist Party that would also have an Arab language newspaper. The cooperation between the two proved short-lived since the Revolt that raged in Syria in the summer of 1925 proved decisive. As already mentioned, these “communists,” in reality, pursued nationalist agendas, and the Revolt proved to be an event in which Shimali and Yuzbek had completely opposite attitudes. When Wolf Auerbach, chairman of the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP), arrived in Beirut to build links between the Lebanese Communist Party and the rebels in Syria, Shimali, who was a Maronite and supported the independence of Lebanon, opposed the move, while Yuzbek, who was for Syrian and Lebanese unity, supported it.<sup>71</sup> The outcome of this confrontation was the departure of Yuzbek from the party and all efforts to bring him back were in vain.<sup>72</sup> The victory of Shimali and his 15 comrades, mostly Lebanese émigrés from Egypt, meant that they not only opposed

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<sup>66</sup> Shimali was a member of the communist party, a syndicalist, and had worked in tobacco production in Alexandria, Egypt. He had created with Rosendal the general confederation of workers in Egypt. In 1922, however, he was accused of internal intrigues and was removed from the party, returning back to Lebanon in 1923.

<sup>67</sup> Daher, *Tarikh Lubnan al-Ijtima‘i*, 408–410.

<sup>68</sup> Ismael and Ismael, *The Communist Movement*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> This referred to Hizb al-‘Ummal al-Lubnani [The Workers’ Party of Lebanon] established in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1922, for which Shimaly was a founding member. The party brought together Lebanese workers advocating for an independent Lebanon and better working conditions.

<sup>70</sup> The original letter was written in German, RGASPI, fond 495. List 85. File 10, 28-29, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 12, 160.

<sup>71</sup> Kosach, *Komunisti*, 162.

<sup>72</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 4, file 11, 7, Teper (Naum) to the Eastern department of Comintern, August 14, 1926, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 19, 162.

supporting the Revolt in Syria, that the Soviet authorities sought to assist, but were concentrated solely in the tiny Bikfaya region, with no representatives in any major city, either in Lebanon or Syria.<sup>73</sup>

### **The missing piece of the puzzle: the Armenians**

It is noteworthy that Berger did not meet with any Armenian representatives during his October visit.<sup>74</sup> This clearly shows that Armenians were not preselected candidates, nor were they regarded as natural allies for the Soviet authorities. It also demonstrates the eagerness of the Communist Party to target the Arabs from the start. Only after failing to unite the local sympathizers did they turn their attention to the Armenians, who mostly lived in the major cities of Syria and Lebanon, as opposed to Shimali and his comrades, who resided in rural areas.

Kosach provides a telling explanation for the Soviet authorities' preference for Armenian (and Jewish) agents over the others, although, in the absence of quotes, it is not clear whether the conclusions are his own or taken from the primary source material:

These people (Armenians and Jews) would not have been as keen to fight against the imperialists if they had not experienced the pain of humiliation in person ... which could have been in the form of poverty, loss of former social position as a result of the Genocide, massacres or *pogroms*, *impossibility of better education*, *death or arrest of close relatives*, *failure in attempts to be leaders in their own national communities*.<sup>75</sup>

This explanation shows that the Soviet authorities often played with the humiliation, personal failure, and frustration of specific individuals to attract them to their cause with promises of compensation. It is also in line with explanations given by former Soviet intelligence officers in their memoirs.<sup>76</sup> This helps to explain why Armenians (and Jews) were preferable targets (not natural allies). Since revolutionary methods intended to destroy the local power relations by replacing them with a new political elite, it attracted many who were excluded from the current power relations but strived for leadership positions. In the case of the Armenians, who were renowned for their love for political affairs, this was surely very attractive. This kind of machination may indeed have been used to recruit a few high-ranking

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<sup>73</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 84, file 9, 1-5 From Naum, Central Committee of Syria to Comintern, "Report of May -July," July 30, 1925, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 18, 162.

<sup>74</sup> Kosach, *Komunisti*, 155; also Madoyan, *Kyank me*. It is noteworthy that although Ter Minassian mentions in her dissertation about Berger's visit in October and his meeting with the Syrian and Lebanese youth – Yousef Yazbek, Farid Dehman, Elias Gacha Amine, Boutrus Hashemine and Fuad Shimali, she still does not consider it as an attempt to target the locals from the very beginning, see Ter Minassian, "La politique," vol. 1, 356.

<sup>75</sup> Kosach, *Komunisti*, 8. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>76</sup> E. Dumbadze, *Na Slujbe*; Georgi S. Aghabekov, *GPU*.

informants in the region.<sup>77</sup> Mostly, however, people adhered to communism voluntarily as a means to fight for their own *national cause*, claiming participation in it and rejecting the former elites and their strategies.

There were other reasons, too; Armenians (like the Jews) had their own socialist parties, Henschak in the case of the Armenians. It was, therefore, not difficult for the Communist party to attract these socialist parties to their side. In the case of the Armenians, the process was facilitated by the efforts of Soviet Armenia, which positioned itself as the only legitimate homeland. Unsurprisingly, communist ideology would soon emerge as a fresh dividing line, the new source of a power struggle in the community.

In Armenian reality, the formation of the “Henschak Student Union” dates back to April 1920 (Adana), when Madoyan, then a student, had applied for party membership at the age of 16. Since he was too young to be accepted, an innovative solution had been found; a Student Union had been created that not only Madoyan but also many of his fellow friends and teachers joined.<sup>78</sup> A few weeks later, a decisive event, the Bolshevik attempt to take over power in the Republic of Armenia in May 1920, made the political direction of the Union more sharply pro-Bolshevik. Although this attempt was unsuccessful and would only be realized a few months later, in December of the same year, it was regarded by this group as salvation for the Armenian statehood that was struggling to survive. Tellingly, their views opposed those of their rivals, the ARF supporters, who held power in Armenia.

As of 1921, Madoyan and other Union members found themselves in Beirut after the ceding of Cilicia. Their first action was to establish contacts with the French Communist party (curiously not with Soviet Armenia) at the beginning of 1923. They requested communist publications, signing their letter as “the Communist Group.”<sup>79</sup> At the beginning of 1924, the Student Union was re-named “*Spartak*”<sup>80</sup> since the members were now workers and no longer students. The name was a strategic choice, as explained in a letter sent to Yerevan on January 8, 1925, “We would like to become a Comintern branch in the East fighting for its ideas... Instead of Communist, we have chosen the name ‘Spartak,’ as obliged by the local conditions. Since there are no other communist organizations here, our refugee status could put the local

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<sup>77</sup> For example, the case of the Armenian priests, who were caught in scandals and were offered undercover, and protection in exchange for becoming Soviet informants. One of them was appointed as the head of the Armenian prelacy in Iraq in 1929. He was tasked to organize an intelligence network, see in Aghabekov, *GPU*, 198.

<sup>78</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 34.

<sup>79</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 48.

<sup>80</sup> Noteworthy, the Marxist revolutionary movement organized in Germany during WWI was also named Spartakus League before changing its name in 1919 to Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands. Spartakus was the famous leader of the largest slave rebellion of the Roman Republic.

workers against us on national and religious grounds.”<sup>81</sup> The letter was signed by president Yeritsian and secretary Madoyan.

The reply from Soviet Armenia soon arrived; it was eight pages long and, besides approving the formation of *Spartak*, sent detailed instructions on how to work among the masses. Their main targets were to be students, young workers, and especially orphans. Soon branches were formed in Zahle, Aleppo, Musa Ler (Alexandretta), and Mosul.<sup>82</sup> In the beginning, the main work consisted of propaganda in the Armenian refugee camps, much to the annoyance of the ARF, who, at that point already controlled internal camp administration. The first major confrontation between the ARF and the communist circles took place on May 10, 1925, in Beirut, laying the foundations for a decades-long tradition of clashes and bloody incidents between the two groups. Madoyan reported that, on the same day, impressed by their success in defeating the ARF, various Henchak unions and apolitical circles joined them.<sup>83</sup>

Unsurprisingly, *Spartak* emerged as the missing piece of the puzzle for the Soviet authorities wishing to spread their propaganda in Syria and Lebanon. In the summer of 1925, Soviet agent Teper reported to Moscow:

*Spartak* is active exclusively among the Armenians and has regular contacts with the Communist party in Armenia. It is necessary to tie it to the Lebanese communists to create regional coverage. In Beirut, *Spartak* has 40 members, in Aleppo – 15, in Zahle – 20, in total 75 members. Armenians will be valuable elements for the party in the future thanks to their organizational skills and superior training.<sup>84</sup>

In the meantime, in 1924, leftists had won the parliamentary elections in France, and General Sarraill had replaced the French High Commissioner Weygand. Shukri Pakhash, the editor of the *Zahle al-Fatat* newspaper that, despite its name, was published in Beirut, had convinced the French governor of Beirut, Leon Cayla, to allow May 1 celebrations<sup>85</sup> as a sign of the change in French politics.<sup>86</sup> The *Spartak* members were taken by surprise to discover a call in *La Syrie* newspaper on April 29, 1925, calling all the workers to celebrate May 1 together.<sup>87</sup> *Spartak* members joined the demonstrations in the streets of Beirut and met Yuzbek

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<sup>81</sup> HAA, fond 48, list 1, file 288, 145, see also, Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 50.

<sup>82</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 51.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>84</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 84, file 9, 1-5 “Report of May -July.”

<sup>85</sup> This was not the first time, that May 1<sup>st</sup> celebrations were held in Lebanon. The first one was in 1905, See in Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 65.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Noteworthy, the call was published in the mouthpiece of the French High Commissioner.

and Shimali for the first time. On May 3, a joint meeting took place that paved the way for the creation of a joint Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party.<sup>88</sup>

The next report that reached Moscow in December 1925 confirmed the merger and the first party congress with the participation of six Arabs and eight Armenians.<sup>89</sup> Among the Armenians, two founding members of *Spartak*, Artin Madoyan and Haykazun Boyajian, had been present.<sup>90</sup> During this congress, the Syrian-Lebanese Communist party was created, which was subordinate to the PCP.<sup>91</sup> Thanks to this merger, the party immediately became a real regional organization with cells in all major cities populated by the Armenians. Furthermore, Armenian-Arab unity gave an international character to the newly created party – one of the requirements of the Comintern. However, most importantly, the Armenian presence not only helped cement the party internally but also claimed Syrian territorial unity, the Soviet policy defended by the Bolsheviks in the Middle East. The benefits of this union were also fully acknowledged by the Lebanese counterparts. Madoyan recalled Yuzbek mentioning that “the party will benefit from the long tradition of communist and militant activities of the Armenians.”<sup>92</sup> As it happened, the party did not benefit much from the merger since all the participants of the first meeting were arrested shortly after and detained until 1928.<sup>93</sup>

If the merger helped the Syrians and the Lebanese represent the party as a solid regional network, *Spartak*, on its part, had good reason to join forces with the Syrian communists. Its leaders reported to Yerevan in December 1925 that it was preferable to unite under the banner of Comintern to avoid being exposed as the only organization working for the cause of the proletariat in the East.<sup>94</sup> Besides, precarious living conditions in the refugee camps, uncertainty over the future, and discontent in the former elite that had traditionally represented the community, created fertile ground for breeding nationalist and extremist ideologies. If Syrians and Lebanese joined the Communist party regarding it as an alternative way to defend their national cause, curiously, their Armenian counterparts did so for the same reasons. It is enough to consider Madoyan’s explanations in this regard. In his four-page document, divided into seven comprehensive points, there is nothing about communist ideology or practice.

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<sup>88</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 66-67.

<sup>89</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 4, file 11, 7, Naum to the Easter Department of Comintern, August 14, 1926, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 19, 162.

<sup>90</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 258, file 51, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 45, 172.

<sup>91</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 84, file 16, 1-3, “Rapport du camarade Saddek, d.l.gu. du Parti Communiste Syrien au VI congres de l’Internationale Communiste, direction de la commission de centrale,” cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 25, 163.

<sup>92</sup> Yazbek’s account to Madoyan, see in Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 80–81.

<sup>93</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 4, file 11, 7, Naum to the Easter Department of Comintern, August 14, 1926.

<sup>94</sup> HHA, fond 48, list 1, file 288, 145.

Point one referred to the October Revolution as an opportunity to defend one's national cause through the participation of the poor, workers, and youth.<sup>95</sup> This is significant as he does not mention any of the communist principles implemented by the same revolution. Instead, he claims new leadership roles for himself and others who had previously been deprived of participating in national affairs. Points two and four referred to Soviet Armenia, whose salvation was possible thanks to the October revolution and Bolshevik intervention. In this sense, "it was a merging of national and socialist directions, which... increased the popularity (of the Communist party) among the Lebanese Armenians."<sup>96</sup> Point five considered the genesis of the Communist Party among the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon as a national liberation movement. The communists sought to fight for the national cause with modern tools and means.<sup>97</sup> Finally, points three, six, and seven referred to the local context: in the early 1920s, the majority of the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon were workers and artisans:

Only the success of the Communist party could ensure the development of national preservation and enable the national culture to flourish in close proximity to the Arab culture. Only thanks to this party could Armenians here (Syria, Lebanon) achieve their full national rights – on the basis of equality of all the communities; to deepen their relations with Soviet Armenia –the Motherland of all the Armenians. Thanks to it, it will be possible ... to satisfy our national demands – the struggle for our Armenian cause *taking the right way*.<sup>98</sup>

As is obvious, there was no mention of communist ideology. Point six clarified that unity with the Arabs through an empowered Communist Party to fight against the imperialists was a necessity "to achieve national security for the Armenians, especially after the Syrian Revolt in which ARF members had taken a dangerous position by cooperating with the French."<sup>99</sup> The last point concluded that Armenians and Arabs should act together since they shared the same fate; imperialists had betrayed both of them. They had not liberated Armenian lands, had encouraged Kemal to invade the Armenian Republic, and ceded Cilicia to Turkey, making them stateless refugees. In the same way, they refused to grant their Arab counterparts independence. Surely, Armenians felt foreign in their host countries, but so did their hosts since their conditions were even worse. If the Armenians joined in fighting against the common enemy, not only would they ensure security and a peaceful cohabitation for them in Syria and Lebanon but in all Arab countries.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 79.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>97</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 81.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 82, 10.

There were other reasons, too; the communists promoted class over ethnicity, which offered a common platform of inclusion.<sup>101</sup> The common participation could serve as a shield against the accusations that only Armenians were communists and that they were responsible for importing communism to Syria. It had one other advantage; Armenian refugees were increasingly regarded as competitors who dropped the prices and created unemployment among the Arabs. Hence, Armenians were regularly targeted in the Arabic press as communist agents who should be deported to Soviet Armenia.<sup>102</sup> These were not just verbal accusations or passive anti-Armenian propaganda. There had been an organized boycott of Armenian goods that had lasted for months. At the beginning of February 1924, *Arev*, the voice of the Armenian Ramkavar party published in Cairo, reported that for the last two months, there had been an ongoing boycott against the Armenian artisans and traders in Damascus: “On the doors of all the mosques and the bazars were placards calling on the people not to buy anything from the Armenians.”<sup>103</sup> The paper also mentioned that such placards were systematically removed by the local police, which was a clear sign that the local authorities did not encourage it. In any case, it could have disastrous effects, considering that in the 1920s, Armenians were overwhelmingly involved in trade and handicrafts. Certain handicrafts were even completely in the hands of the Armenians, such as the carpet weaving and alaja dress,<sup>104</sup> significant numbers were also employed in embroidery and shoe-making as well as trade, compared to relatively fewer in the professions.<sup>105</sup> As late as 1928, in the whole of Aleppo, there was only one Armenian official in the public administration – Yervand Zorian (Khazine ra’isi). The same was true for the other regions, too.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> The anthem of the party emphasized cross-sectarian cooperation, calling Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Druze to unite, see in Daher, *Tarikh Lubnan al-Ijtima’i*, 415. Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs*.

<sup>102</sup> See part IV of this dissertation.

<sup>103</sup> “Sharjum Hay Gaghtakanneru Dem” [Movement against the Armenian refugees], *Arev*, February 6, 1924, 1.

<sup>104</sup> This was a traditional dress widely used in Anatolia. After the Armenian deportations, there was a great demand for this dress, which was partially supplied by the Armenian refugees of Aleppo. Reportedly about 4,000 refugees were employed in the Alaja industry in Aleppo, see in “Halepi Gaghtakanneru Zbaghume” [The Occupation of the Aleppo Armenians], *Arev*, March 14, 1924, 2. Later Turkish authorities forbid the usage of this dress, causing considerable damage to many Armenian refugees employed. See in Topuzyan, *Armenian participation*, 22.

<sup>105</sup> In mid-1925, among the 20,000 male Armenian refugee population of Aleppo, there were 32 doctors, 15 pharmacists, 85 dentists, 10 lawyers, 60 mechanics, 350 drivers, 21 priests, 250 teachers, 250 money lenders, 600 shop keepers, 160 shoe-makers, 450 carpenters, 300 blacksmiths, 150 tinsmiths, 1500 masons, 850 net weavers, 8000 carpet and embroidery makers, 6000 daily wagers and only 50 persons were employed in the public administration (banks, railways, etc). J. A. Papikian, “Suria ev Hayutyune, Tentesakan katsutyune,” [Syria and the Conditions of the Armenians] (c), *Arev* August 26, 1925, 1-2.

<sup>106</sup> In Alexandretta, which also hosted a substantial number of Armenian refugees, there was only one Armenian official – P. Tsaghikian, the head of the police. Armenian native villages of Antioch were allowed to have their own Armenian *mukhtas* (head of villages). In 1928, in Aleppo there were 30 doctors, 16 pharmacists, 20 dentists, 18 educators, 8 engineers, and about 100 Armenians were employed in railway and banks. “Vitsakagrakan Teghekutyunner Halepi Hayotc masin,” [Statistical Data About the Arm. in Aleppo] *Arev*, January 23, 1928, 2.

Communists, on the other hand, deprived of participation in the political scene, had concentrated their main activities in the trade unions. Armenians and Syrians had their own workers' unions that usually grouped the workers with the same profession. Such Unions had existed even before WWI.<sup>107</sup> Armenians in Syria and Lebanon were encouraged to form such unions to group the people with the same professions and help each other find employment.<sup>108</sup> These unions, however, were largely community-specific and stayed apart, fueling competition rather than cooperation.<sup>109</sup> The communists, by contrast, proposed united trade unions comprising both Armenians and Arabs under the same umbrella, which offered a solution to the competition. Nevertheless, any efforts in this direction were doomed to failure until 1928.<sup>110</sup> The cause was twofold, the arrest of the Armenian and Arab communist leaders through whom the link between was ensured and a decisive event – the attack on the Armenian refugee camp in Damascus. The Armenians were accused of being “French agents.” With the arrest of the communist leaders on both sides, all connection between the Armenians and the Arabs was cut off, and the Communist party was practically crushed. Its revitalization, including the creation of the first united trade unions, was only possible in 1928, which will be discussed in Part IV.

### **The Communists and the Revolt**

The Syrian Revolt has received much scholarly attention, and has most often been studied from the sectarian<sup>111</sup> and nationalist points of view.<sup>112</sup> The elite politics have been studied from the Marxist perspective,<sup>113</sup> and the agrarian character of the conflict has been captured too.<sup>114</sup> The scholarly research has been supplemented by the memoirs of the key French officials, published shortly after the Revolt,<sup>115</sup> and other important sources include the memoirs of the

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<sup>107</sup> For example, the association of the typographers in Beirut dated back to 1914 and the railway workers of Damascus-Homs line to 1908, Jacques Couland, “Movement syndicale en situation colonial,” 61.

<sup>108</sup> Hay Dzayn reported on 11 January, that a manpower agency was established to register all the unemployed girls and women, see in “Ashkhatanki Tun,” [Center for Employment], *Hay Dyazn*, January 11, 1919, 3.

<sup>109</sup> We know that such professional unions existed among the Armenians and the Syrians, we do not know if they had further sub-unions, such as Kurdish, Muslim, etc.

<sup>110</sup> H. Hovhannisyán and H. U. Sargsya, *Sirian Ankaxutyán*, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Ḥasan Amín al-Biaynî, *Durûz sûriyya wa lubnân fî ahd al-intidâb al-fransî, 1920–1943*, *Jabal al- arab şafaḥât min târiḫ al-muwahḥidîn al-durûz (1685–1927)*; Kais Firro, *A History of the Druzes* (Brill, 1992); Birgit Schâbler, *Aufstânde im Drusenberglând: Ethnizitât und Integration einer Lândlichen Gesellschaft Syriens vom Osmanischen Reich bis zur Staatlichen Unabhângigkeit, 1850–1949* (Gotha: Perthes, 1996).

<sup>112</sup> Khoury “The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism: Interwar Syria Revisited,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed., James Jankowski et al., 273–287. Khoury, *Syria and the French*.

<sup>113</sup> Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*.

<sup>114</sup> Alexis Rappas, “Three Murders and a Mandate: On Property and French Sovereignty in Interwar Syria,” *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 24 (2020).

<sup>115</sup> Général Charles Joseph Andréa, *La révolte druze et l’insurrection de Damas* (Paris Payot 1937); Capitaine Gabriel Carbillet, *Au Djébel Druse, choses vues et vécues* (Paris 1929); Paul Coblentz, *Le silence de Sarrail* (Louis Querelle, 1930).



eye-witnesses.<sup>116</sup> The international resonance of the Revolt has also been studied,<sup>117</sup> as well as the lived experiences of the Levantines.<sup>118</sup>

Most recently, the Revolt has been studied by Michel Provence, who concluded that it was the largest, longest, and most destructive revolt ever to occur in the Middle East and that it provided a template for further Middle East revolts.<sup>119</sup> He also considered it a seminal moment in the creation of a unified “Syrian” identity.<sup>120</sup> Yet, the communist or Armenian participation has not been addressed in any of the research on this event.

“The Great Syrian Revolt,” as it became known, broke out in July 1925, just when the Soviet authorities had turned their attention to the East in the hope of inciting “revolutions” against the Western imperialists. It also happened three months after the first Syrian-Armenian joint meeting at the beginning of May, when the party had officially emerged as a solid regional network thanks to the Armenian presence.

The Revolt started as a local uprising of the Druze people inhabiting the Jabal Hawran region of Syria. Under the French mandate, the Druze were granted autonomy and, for a brief period, had even formed their own statelet before merging with a unified Syrian state. It all started when, after the death of a Druze governor, a French interim governor, a certain Captain Gabriel Carbillet, was imposed on them, whose rule proved despotic. Particular hatred was aroused by Carbillet’s large-scale public works, for which forced labor was used.<sup>121</sup> Soon the intimidation of the Druze notables, coupled with the reluctance of the French authorities to replace Carbillet, sparked the largest and long-lasting anti-colonial insurgency in the interwar Arab World.<sup>122</sup>

This dissertation is not concerned with describing the Revolt, which has been done elsewhere. Our task is to reveal the Armenian participation. However, we consider it necessary

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<sup>116</sup> Alice Poulleau, *A Damas sous les bombes: journal d’une française pendant la révolte syrienne, 1925-1926* (Paris, 1926); The uprising in two local contexts is documented in N. E. Bou-Nacklie, “Tumult in Syria’s Hama in 1925: The Failure of a Revolt,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 33:2 (1998), 273-289; Frédéric Pichon, *Maaloula (xix-xxi siècles) Du Vieux Avec Du Neuf: Histoire et identité d’un village chrétien de Syrie*, (Presses de l’Ifpo, 2010). The career of one of the revolt’s leaders is documented in Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914-1948* (Hill and Wang Inc: US, 2016).

<sup>117</sup> Reem Bailony, “From Mandate Borders to the Diaspora: Rashaya’s Transnational Suffering and the Making of Lebanon in 1925,” *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 26: 2 (2018); Georgio Poti, “Imperial Violence, Anti-Colonial Nationalism and International Society: The Politics of Revolt Across Mediterranean Empires, 1919-1927,” (unpublished Phd diss. European University Institute, 2016).

<sup>118</sup> Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, “Involuntary History: Writing Levantines into the Nation,” *Contemporary Levant*, vol. 5:1 (2020), 44-53; Joel Veldkamp, “Sectarian Violence in the 1925 Syrian Uprising,” unpublished paper.

<sup>119</sup> M. Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (University of Texas Press, 2005), 12.  
<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>121</sup> Capitaine Gabriel Carbillet, *Au Djébel Druse, choses vues et vécues* (Paris, 1929).

<sup>122</sup> For a detailed account of the events leading to the Uprising, see. E. Rabbath, “L’insurrection Syrienne de 1925-1927,” *Revue Historique* (Avril-Juin, 1982), 267:2 (542), 405-447; Provence, *The Great Syrian*, 12; Lutskiy, “Natsionalnaya Revolutsia.

to highlight a few differences in the Western and communist historiographies that reveal the Communist understanding of “the Arab national-revolutionary movement,” as the Soviet orientalist chose to name it. As stated earlier, the uprising happened when all Soviet hopes to initiate revolutions in Western countries were dashed away. Nevertheless, the Soviets were not desperate to embrace just any revolts or “revolutions” in the East. The Kurdish Sheikh Said rebellion in Turkey,<sup>123</sup> for example, which broke out almost at the same time as the Revolt in Syria, did not receive the same attention. On the contrary, the Soviet attitude toward the Kurdish rebellion was hostile.<sup>124</sup> In Part IV of this dissertation, we shall see that the Soviet authorities had the same attitude toward the other Kurdish rebellions too.

The Syrian Revolt, however, was interpreted in Marxist terms and seemed to offer an opportunity for the USSR, although it did not correspond to the classical or “acceptable revolutions” that the USSR could embrace readily. First, the “revolutionaries” did not demand agrarian reforms; on the contrary, they were against them.<sup>125</sup> Even more scandalous for the Bolsheviks, the “revolution” was led by a well-known and wealthy landowner, Al-Atrash, and not by peasants. Therefore, communist orientalist needed to explain and justify their support. In this regard, the detailed report presented by Lutskiy during the first session of the Arabists, held on 14–17 July 1935, 10 years after the events, is revealing, for it sums up the Soviet efforts to present the matter in a way that fitted the Soviet narrative.<sup>126</sup>

Lutskiy’s account is controversial. On the one hand, he blamed the Revolt’s failure on the bourgeois leaders and claimed that there was no bourgeois participation in the affair. On the other, he said that the Revolt was doomed to fail because it was led by the bourgeoisie.”<sup>127</sup>

According to Lutskiy, it did not matter that the Syrians did not demand any agrarian reforms and that their revolution was led by the bourgeoisie. In fact, it showed:

The need to have a small urban bourgeoisie in order to achieve a national anti-imperial front. Even if the working classes of Syria were not yet organized... and did not have any contact with the international proletariat, in this Revolt, they grew. It also proved that the national liberation movement of the Syrian people was connected with the international fight... since it weakened imperialism and strengthened the working classes who fought for socialism.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> More on this rebellion see in Jordi Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Peter Lang : Bern, 2007).

<sup>124</sup> “Kerdakan Sharjume, Voch Mek Chap ev Kshir,” [The Kurdish Rebellion, No Weight], *Yerevan*, December 27, 1925, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Agrarian reforms were not mentioned by the newly formed *Hizb al-Sha‘b* (Peoples’ Party) during its opening ceremony on June 5, 1925. The party programme see in The National Archives and Record Administration (hereafter NARA), Confidential files of the American consulate of Damascus, Volume 464, (3-4), enclosure N: 4, dispatch N: 273 of September 14, 1925, 200; Koury, *Syria*, 144.

<sup>126</sup> Lutskiy, “Natsionalnaya Revolutsia, 74.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

The uprising did not come as a complete surprise for the Soviet authorities. On April 11, 1925, months before the Revolt erupted, Berger had penned an article in *Pravda*, mentioning the existence of a revolutionary mood among the Syrians and an ongoing anti-French agitation led by *Hizb al-watani al-Arabi* (Arab national party) and its secret branches, given that nothing could be open “under the oppressive French rule.”<sup>129</sup>

The Bolsheviks, including the French Communist party, tried to connect the ongoing struggles of Syria and Morocco (Riff uprising), presenting them as national liberation movements and appealing to wider Muslim circles for support.<sup>130</sup>

In the French diplomatic sources, the role of Moscow and its attempts to create a Pan-Arab movement is duly acknowledged.<sup>131</sup> Kévonian documented the formation of a secret colonial Commission created in Geneva by the Comintern in the autumn of 1924 after its Fifth Congress (June 1924). It aimed to undertake propaganda in the colonial countries to incite revolutions. Communist support for the Riff uprising was also pledged.<sup>132</sup>

In mid-September 1925, communist posters signed by the Lebanese Communist Central Committee were put up on the walls in Beirut. The posters announced, “Soldiers, workers, peasants – this is the red flag over Syria... It is time to stand up and take arms.”<sup>133</sup> At the beginning of November, by the decision of the party’s central committee, Madoyan was tasked with drafting a French-language call addressed to the French army soldiers and widely distributed in Beirut, Zahle, Rayak, and Aleppo. The call read:

Soldiers and the sons of workers and peasants, the revolutionaries whom the imperialists order you to kill and destroy their houses, are workers and peasants like you and your fathers. Instead of directing your arms towards them, it is your duty to direct those weapons toward these commanders and capitalists who suck your blood for the sake of their interests.<sup>134</sup>

On 14 November 1925, three weeks after the bombardment of Damascus, Auerbach, the PCP chairman, pleaded for immediate support from Moscow:

All the East is looking at us, Bolsheviks, as loyal collaborators... Our passive reaction has created a deep disappointment... Our support depends on the future of this movement. We can receive a hegemony in the national movements in Syria and

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<sup>129</sup> MAE, vol. 50/209, # 223, Berger, “L’agitation anti-française en Syrie,” *Pravda*, avril 11, 1925.

<sup>130</sup> Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire. Les acteurs européens et la scène proche-orientale pendant l’entre-deux-guerres* (Sorbonne : Paris, 2004), 430.

<sup>131</sup> MAE, vol. 50/193, #95-104, Le commandant Dentz, chef du service des renseignements du Levant, “Note au sujet de d’insurrection du Djebel Druze,” Beyrouth, 4 Septembre 1925.

<sup>132</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 430.

<sup>133</sup> “Komunist Propaganda” [Communist Propaganda] *Nor Pyunik*, September 16, 1925, 4.

<sup>134</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 88.

Palestine... if we provide real material help and not just by words... Already, Arab nationalists declare that Bolsheviks are afraid of disputes with the French, which is why they have left us alone... I find the situation quite serious; any delay in making decisions may have disastrous consequences for our work in the East.<sup>135</sup>

Moscow was quick to react; its response was received within two weeks, on December 8. It agreed that the situation dictated urgent military support to the Syrian rebels. However, it ought to be done so as not to create the tiniest suspicion about the participation of Comintern or, worse, the USSR.<sup>136</sup> In other words, neither Comintern nor the USSR could have any official involvement.

We have been unable to trace any actual USSR support in the archives. However, the French authorities, who suspected foreign (probably British) undercover interference in the Revolt, developed similar suspicions about the USSR. Several rumors and intelligence reports found in the French diplomatic files testify to this.<sup>137</sup> At the beginning of January 1926, secret instructions sent from the Comintern to the Palestinian and Syrian communists were discovered. The documents contained lengthy instructions, especially to the communist members of Syria, advising them to disseminate communist propaganda under the call “to fight against the French imperialists.” They also advised adopting different strategies in different parts of Syria and Lebanon. Thus, in Lebanon, which was politically more advanced, the propaganda was to be done under the “struggle against the feudalists,” which aimed to turn the peasants and the workers against the notables and large landowners, while in the Jabal al-Druze, where feudalism had much deeper roots, the propaganda was to play on nationalist sentiments instead and exploit the hatred toward the foreigners. Furthermore, the migration of workers from Egypt to Syria and Lebanon was to be encouraged since most of them had already received a certain dose of communist propaganda.<sup>138</sup> Finally, the recruitment of a large number of new members was advised against; instead, the core team was to be cultivated. Tellingly, officially the party was to demand reforms that had nothing to do with the communist ideology; elections of a

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<sup>135</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 84, file 10, 20; Abuzaem (Auverbuch) to Moscow, Report, November 14, 1925, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 17, 161.

<sup>136</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, list 84, file 10, 43; Decision of the Comintern sent to Abuzaem, December 8, 1925, cited in Kosach, *Komunisti*, fn. 33, 166.

<sup>137</sup> MAE, vol. 50/193, #80 Telegramme, Martel à affaire étrangères, Pekin, 14 septembre 1925 ; MAE, 50/210, Renseignement, secret, (source, généralement bonne), 27 novembre 1925, 27-28; MAE, 50/210, #30. Copie pour la sous-direction d'Asie, Renseignement, bonne source, 28 novembre 1925. Rumors about possible URSS involvement are also held in NARA, Volume 465, (1-4), N: 32, from Keeley to Beirut and Aleppo, Confidential, “Memorandum on the Political Situation in the Damascus Consular District,” December 31, 1925, 2.

<sup>138</sup> In 1920 a Socialist party was organized in Egypt. In 1923 it changed its name to “The Communist Party of Egypt” and became a section of the Communist International. In 1924, it was able to organize several mass strikes and demonstrations in Alexandria. In the same year it was banned by the new government headed by Zaglul Pasha, see in Spector, *The Soviet Union*, 127.

representative Council by universal suffrage, gender equality, voting rights for the women, press freedom, abolition of *wakfs*, and the canceling of peasant and workers' debts.<sup>139</sup>

The communists had also established direct ties with Sultan Al-Atrash through a Lebanese Druze, a certain Nassreddin.<sup>140</sup> Madoyan's memoir does not elaborate on this interesting episode. It is unclear exactly when the contact was established and what was agreed upon between the parties.

Another type of communist assistance was given via publications in the foreign and domestic press condemning the "barbaric extermination of women and children by the French forces, and the French massacres orchestrated in Damascus."<sup>141</sup> Anti-mandate articles were also published in *Humanité*, the communist organ in Paris, which was disseminated among the French forces in Syria (as well as Morocco). These calls urged the French soldiers and officers not to fight against the Syrians and restore the peace immediately since their real enemy was French imperialism.<sup>142</sup>

As expected, the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party openly declared its full support for the Revolt. In fact, this was the party's first public statement, made in Arabic, French and Armenian. Furthermore, their communiqués stated that the rebellion was taking place in coordination with "the international communist movement."<sup>143</sup>

Talking about the *communist great role*, most historians still mention only in passing the Soviet military support to the rebels, if they mention it at all. Armenian historians Hovhannisyan and Sargsyan, for example, refer to supplies of medicines, weapons, and active dissemination of propaganda among the French forces.<sup>144</sup> Madoyan, on the other hand, mentions nothing about the delivery of arms but confirms propaganda (mostly drafted by himself), as well as the provision of medicine.<sup>145</sup>

Shortly after, on the first Sunday of December, the first Communist Party congress was convened in Beirut. During this meeting, Teper read Comintern's letter, which approved the political direction of the party.<sup>146</sup> The party decided to continue its support to the Revolt and facilitate its spread in Lebanon, continue its work in the trade unions, and demand fair land

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<sup>139</sup> MAE, vol. 50/210, # 47, Gaston Maugras, consul général de France en Palestine à son excellence Monsieur le président du conseil, ministre des affaires étrangères, 'Propagande communiste', Jérusalem, 16 décembre 1925.

<sup>140</sup> Nassreddin had previously fought against the British rule in Palestine and Zionism and was exiled by the British authorities to Lebanon. He was under French surveillance; see in Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 92.

<sup>141</sup> MAE, 50/195, E 412/1, "Les événements de Damas," Un télégramme du général Hou-Han-Min, *Izvestia*, Novembre 12, 1925.

<sup>142</sup> *L'humanité*, August 24, 25, 1925; September 4, 9, 1925, cited in Lustkiy, *Natsinal'no Osvoboditel'naya*, 190.

<sup>143</sup> Ismael & Ismael, 14.

<sup>144</sup> Hovhannisyan & Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankaxutyun*, 133-134.

<sup>145</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 85

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 90-91.

distribution by confiscating the lands of the big land owners, *except for those who supported the Revolt.*<sup>147</sup>

The French response to the congress and its adopted resolutions were harsh. All the key party leaders who participated in this congress were arrested. Teper and Shimali were arrested immediately, while Madoyan and Boyajian were picked up in January 1926. All of them were arrested not for *being communists but for their support of the Syrian Revolt*. As we learn from Madoyan's memoirs, Armenian and Syrian members were also kept and questioned separately, and the French made an attempt to play the two communities against each other. For example, Armenian communists were told that their interests *as Armenians* were opposed to the interests of the local Muslims.<sup>148</sup>

It is noteworthy that all the arrested members were condemned to death by the *Ottoman penalty code* (Articles 55, 56, 57), *not the Syrian one* for being guilty of inciting people to armed revolution and spreading propaganda among the French soldiers. The orders were to be executed within 24 hours.<sup>149</sup> It was thanks to the intervention of the French Communist Party that the punishment was changed to forced residence, before the prisoners were finally released in January 1928.<sup>150</sup>

After the arrest of the communist leaders, efforts were made to keep the Armenian participation in the Syrian Revolt active. For example, a special call was published in the communist organ *Proletar* (New York) addressed to the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party and the Armenians, in particular. It called on the Armenian workers to stand up against the French imperialists.<sup>151</sup> During these two years of imprisonment, all ties and communication between the Armenian and Arab communists were cut off. This may explain why, even though there were certain segments of Armenians who supported the rebels, there was no coordinated effort. Instead, mutual suspicion grew, especially after the October refugee camp incident.

## **Chapter II: Armenians and the Syrian Revolt**

This chapter sheds light on the Armenian participation in the Revolt by showing how this major upheaval made the internal confrontation between the pro-Soviet forces and their opponents

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>148</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 93.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Armenians were sent to Raqqa and the Arabs to Qadmus, before joining all together in the prison of Tartus, Madoyan, *Kyank me*, 92-95, 97.

<sup>151</sup> "Surio ev Libabani Konkusi Koche Hay Ashkhatavornerin" [Syrian and Lebanese Communist Party Calls to the Armenians Workers], *Nor Pyunik*, January 27, 1926, 2.

sharper. It reveals the basis of the accusations that the Armenians were siding with the French and were implicated in suppressing the Revolt. Moreover, it demonstrates how misplaced such claims were.

### **Armenian reactions to the Revolt**

Like the USSR involvement, Armenian participation in the Revolt is also contested and unclear. The Revolt created confusion and chaos not only among the Syrians but also among the Armenian communities of Syria and Lebanon, adding new layers to the internal power struggle. Rumors circulated that the Revolt was also dangerous for the security of the Armenians and was directed at them too. Madoyan believed that such rumors were spread deliberately by the French. He also confirmed the assertion of Topuzyan that the Armenian community kept a neutral stance despite the small number of Armenian volunteers in the French army.<sup>152</sup>

As the rumors spread, the communists believed it was necessary to clarify the position of the Armenians. To this end, Madoyan drafted a call on October 12, 1925, which was distributed widely in the Armenian camps.<sup>153</sup> The call explained that the movement was against the French and not the Armenians, “calling on the Armenians not to believe rumors, and false propaganda and not to accept military service in the French army, instead they needed to stand by the Arab national revolution that also aligned with the Armenian national interests and security.”<sup>154</sup> This simple call created chaos in the biggest camp in Beirut – Surb Khach (Saint Cross), whose internal administration was in the hands of the rival political party – ARF. Its leaders rushed to declare their loyalty to the French High Commissioner, “protesting against a few irresponsible declarations.”<sup>155</sup> In the meantime, the call also arrived in Aleppo and Alexandretta, asking the Armenians not only to refrain from fighting in French military units but also to reject the unpaid and mandatory labor of building roads and bridges imposed on them by the French.<sup>156</sup> It is noteworthy, that such unpaid and mandatory labor imposed on the Druze is believed to be the initial cause of the uprising.

*Yerevan*, which was the organ of Soviet Armenian authorities in Paris and had started its publication only in the fall of 1925, reported that the rebels had established temporary revolutionary governments in the places controlled by them and that “thousands of Armenians

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<sup>152</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 84.

<sup>153</sup> Madoyan, “Development and Maturation,” 2.

<sup>154</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 85.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

had been arrested by the French authorities.”<sup>157</sup> While the *Yerevan* issue of December 3 informed its readers that Armenians, too, had formed a revolutionary committee to support the Revolt by running anti-French propaganda and delivering medicine to the rebels.<sup>158</sup> In the words of Topuzyan, “Armenians stayed loyal to their second homeland, deepening their relations with their Arab brothers and joining them in their struggle against the imperialists, thereby opening a new page in Armenian-Arab relations.”<sup>159</sup>

The Communist narrative, presenting the Armenians as overwhelmingly pro-rebel and anti-French, fails to explain why the Armenian refugee camp was attacked in Damascus on October 18, 1925, during the second rebel assault on Damascus. The Armenian historian Topuzyan writing in 1968 on the Armenian participation in the national liberation movements in Syria and Lebanon, undoubtedly wrote from the communist perspective. He recalled how the Armenian vicar of Damascus had refused to take the weapons distributed by the French on August 24, 1925, during the first rebel assault on Damascus. He had announced that “Armenians are newcomers in Syria; they are loyal to the government and friends with the locals. Armenians do not wish to take any sides in this conflict.”<sup>160</sup> Both the French and the Syrians were reportedly satisfied with the Armenian neutral attitude; the French appreciated their far-sightedness, while the Syrians had announced that Armenians were brothers.<sup>161</sup>

How can we explain the Armenian camp incident on 18 October? It is a widespread claim in the historiography that the attack on the refugee camp was to punish the Armenians who had sided with the French since many Armenians served in the French military units and were employed to suppress the revolt. Moreover, Armenian volunteers were accused of brutality toward the Syrians. It was also said that many Armenians had participated in the looting of Syrian villages.

Madoyan, too, failed to explain the Armenian refugee camp incident. Interestingly, there is a gap in his memoir between October 12 and November 11, 1925. Thus, the camp incident is omitted. The memoir reports a meeting convened on November 11 in Beirut, two weeks after the camp incident, where the message of October 12 was issued to the gathered crowd for the second time. This time, it aimed to “repair the *misunderstanding* created by the French.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> We have not been able to find the news about the arrest cited in *Yerevan*. The news about the temporary governments was mentioned in “Damascusi Depkere,” [The Events in Damascus] *Yerevan*, Decem. 8, 1925, 4.

<sup>158</sup> *Yerevan*, Paris, December 3, 1925, cited in Hovhannisyan and Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankaxutyun*, 134.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>160</sup> “Suriakan Depkere, Hayeru Dirke” [The Syrian Events and the Arm. Position], *Yerevan*, Nov. 12, 1925, 4.

<sup>161</sup> Hovhannisyan & Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun*, 50-51.

<sup>162</sup> Madoyan, “Ararat-i Paraktoghakan Eluytner ev Mer Pataskhane: Jeshmartutune Libanani Apstambutyun Shrjani Masin,” [The Biased Announcements of Ararat and Our Response: The Truth About the Uprising in Lebanon] *Mer Neshanaban e Araj*, October 9, 1960; Madoyan, “Development and Maturation.” (Emphasis mine).



Curiously, no account mentions that there were also pro-rebel Armenians, namely Madoyan and his supporters. This suggests that either the existence of the pro-rebel Armenians was unknown to the rebels and the wider Syrian public or that there were other Armenian groups who, indeed, had sided with the French. These groups would logically be composed of ARF followers, who were blamed for being pro-Western and collaborating closely with the French authorities. Significantly, Topuzyan did not put the entire blame for this incident on the ARF as Soviet historians usually did. Nor did he put it on the Turks, the second most common scapegoat for all the misfortunes befalling the Armenians. Topuzyan claimed that the ARF received financial aid from the French, along with other Bedouin chiefs and pro-French notables,<sup>163</sup> but we need to be careful with his accusations against the ARF. During Soviet rule, it was mandatory for all authors writing from Soviet Armenia “to expose the imperialist ARF.” Hence Topuzyan’s assertion that ARF members refrained from joining the armed units but were still guilty because they were French allies. In fact, a careful reading of the French diplomatic and ARF archives suggests that the ARF supporters were not entirely pro-French, as the Soviet historians claimed, as we shall see later.

### **The fateful day, October 18, 1925**

Armenian refugees in Damascus were concentrated in three main camps, Kadim, Bab al-Sharkhiy, and Suqaniye, out of which only Kadim was located on the outskirts of Damascus in the Meidan neighborhood. This was also the only camp that was attacked. In the ARF archives in Boston, there are a few detailed reports of the revolt.<sup>164</sup> Among these documents is a 25-page long report sent by a certain Ashot from Damascus to the central ARF bureau on October 29, 1925, days after the camp incident, by an eyewitness, supposedly an ARF member.<sup>165</sup> The report gives a detailed day-to-day description of the events leading to the attack. Similar detailed, day-to-day reports are also held in the American confidential consular files sent from Damascus to the Secretary of State. There is also the diary of the French eyewitness Alice Poulleau. We have compared and made extensive use of these sources to reconstruct the scene.

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<sup>163</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnaksutyune*, 24.

<sup>164</sup> The Central Archives of the ARF, Boston (Hereafter ARF archives), Fond E, file 973, N:47-48, “Lernavayi Kentronakan Komite: Lidj Yentakok, Ashot,” [The Central Bureau of Lernavayr (Cilicia, Syria), subdivision Lidj, Ashot] “Teghekagir Damascusi Apstambakan Sharjman Masin” [Report about the Revolt in Damascus], 25 pages, signed by Ashot and Vahan, ARF Bureau of Lidj (Damascus), October 29, 1925.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Just days before the event (October 10, 12, and 13), rebels attacked automobiles on the Damascus-Beirut road, only five miles from Damascus, and the villages around Damascus were attacked daily. All French efforts to stop the attacks were without success.<sup>166</sup> On October 14, a French unit that had carried out punitive actions returned to Damascus, bringing with them 115 prisoners and 24 dead (the 24<sup>th</sup> was a dead dog put among the dead human bodies by accident or design). The dead bodies were exposed in the main public square of Merdjé, while the prisoners tied with ropes and under heavy guard were paraded by the corpses, and a picture was taken.<sup>167</sup> It was believed that the scene would instill fear in the gathered crowd; however, just the opposite happened. Two days later, as a response to the “French barbarism,” the bodies of twelve Circassians were found at the eastern gate of Damascus. The next day, on October 17, another unit composed of Algerians pursued the rebels, returning with six prisoners and six donkeys, which they later attempted to sell in the Christian neighborhoods.<sup>168</sup>

On Sunday morning, October 18, 1925, a fight broke out between two Circassian soldiers who quarreled over the division of the plunder they were trying to sell. Their bullets killed two innocent bystanders and wounded a third.<sup>169</sup> The report concluded that this incident, especially the sound of the bullets and the rumors that the Druze were about to enter the city, resulted in the outbreak. The ARF report is identical in describing the events. The only difference is that it states the dispute broke out between a Circassian soldier, who sold his booty, and an Arab buyer, which ended with the murder of the Arab.<sup>170</sup> It is noteworthy that the Circassians had made it a tradition to sell the booty in Christian neighborhoods.

The American consul commented that both the practice of selling the booty (which was done not for profit but rather for punishment) as well as the careless choice of location (often the Christian neighborhoods) was “a deplorable feature of the French authorities.”<sup>171</sup> The report specified that, although most of the plunder was offered for sale *by the Circassian troops*, rather than by French regulars, they were in French military uniform.<sup>172</sup> The report further clarified, that “while no Christians are known to have bought any of the plunder, the attempt to sell it in the Christian quarter quickly bred stories that the Christians were profiting at the expense of the Moslem martyrs.”<sup>173</sup> It is noteworthy that this report does not mention anything about

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<sup>166</sup> NARA, Confidential files, volume 465, From American consulate Damascus to the Secretary of State, N: 234, October 23, 1925, “Developments in the political situation leading to the bombardment,” 2 (69).

<sup>167</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi.”

<sup>168</sup> NARA, Confidential files, volume 465, From American consulate Damascus to the Secretary of State, N: 234.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi,” 5, 9-10.

<sup>171</sup> NARA, Confidential files, Volume 465, From American consulate, Damascus to Secretary of State, N: 234, 4.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 5.

Armenians and clearly states that the incident involved the Circassians. Similarly, the ARF report mentioned that just a week before the fateful event, the French authorities had undertaken severe measures against the rebels by burning their villages and destroying their houses, an exercise in which 400 Circassian volunteers had participated.<sup>174</sup> Once again, there was no word about the Armenians. A detailed description of this incident is also documented in the report of Colonel Raynal, who was later sent to Syria on a fact-finding mission.<sup>175</sup>

Considering the striking similarity of the description of this fight with another that had occurred six years previously during another mob gathering in Aleppo, we may suppose that such fights and incidents were not uncommon in the bazars. Meanwhile, a detail in one of the French archives seems to explain the emptying of the streets and shutting down of the shops. According to this account, taxi drivers and coachmen who arrived in the Citadel area from Meidan (where the rebels had been hiding since early morning) brought the news that “the Druze are coming, close your shops,” and the effect had been immediate. Notably, the French succeeded in persuading many people to reopen their shops shortly.<sup>176</sup>

Once the shots had been fired on that Sunday, the chaos was total and immediate. Suddenly, at about 4.30 pm, armed men appeared in the Shaghur and Meidan neighborhoods and quickly reached the city center. Those were precisely the neighborhoods from where the rebels were expected since Damascus is surrounded by mountains on the other three sides. Shaghur was also the Jewish neighborhood of Damascus, where about 10,000 persons lived in a relatively small space. The detailed account of the director of the Israelite school, who reported as the events unfolded, is also interesting for our purposes. It describes how 50 armed men, who had been hiding in the orchards since early morning, started an assault by shouting, “*Voici jeunes Damascenes les Druzes vos frères qui arrivent. En avant pour la guerre contre l'Étranger et contre le Chrétien qui l'a appelé dans ce pays.*”<sup>177</sup> The few French forces stationed in the area were easily overcome, while the call was obeyed by the neighborhood’s Muslim and Druze inhabitants. The first target was the Hijaz train station and the nearby

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<sup>174</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi,” 3.

<sup>175</sup> MAE, vol 50/237, #93, #97, Ministère des affaires étrangères, direction des affaires politiques et commerciales, Syrie, E-412- 2Abis, rapports à la Société des Nations, enquête du colonel Raynal, 3ème partie Damas, 1926.

<sup>176</sup> MAE, vol. 50/233, #30, du général Gamelin, commandant supérieur des troupes du Levant à Le Haut-Commissaire, “Réponses aux accusation portées par les pétitions syriennes contre le commandement française,” sècret, Beyrouth, 7 juin 1926, 7.

<sup>177</sup>[Here, young Damascenes, your brother Druzes are coming. War to the Foreigner and against the Christian who has been invited here] in MAE, 50/195, E 412/1, Du directeur de l'école d'Alliance Israélite Universelle, Monsieur Silberstein, 9 novembre 1925.

Armenian refugee camp. The railway was looted, and the camp was set on fire. The head of Dummar train station, Emir Bellama (Christian), was killed during the clash.<sup>178</sup>

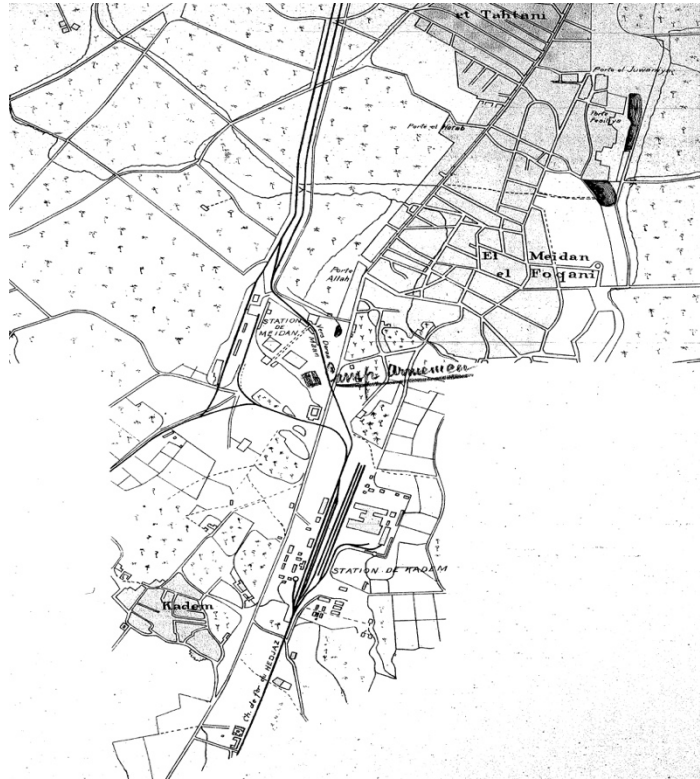


Figure 12. The location of the Armenian camp and the station. Source MAE, vol. 50/195.

According to the testimony of the director of the Israelite school, the Armenian victims (about 60 people) had sought shelter in the wagons at the train station.<sup>179</sup> This testimony seems accurate and corresponds to the detailed account of General Gamelin. Gamelin claims that the spark igniting the Damascus outbreak had been the arrival of General Sarrail on the morning of October 18. Some rebels had even sought to attack his train upon its appearance at Kadim train station. It was only thanks to an unexpected early arrival that the General had escaped the attack.<sup>180</sup> However, this detailed report does not mention anything about the camp incident. This means that some rebel groups were indeed in the train station and that the clash with the Armenian refugees probably happened in the train station, which was very close to the refugee camp. It is even possible that the camp itself was not attacked but that locals had entered the

<sup>178</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi, 18; Alice Poulleau, *A Damas sous*, 103.

<sup>179</sup> MAE Série Syrie-levant, vol. 50/195, E 412/1, Du directeur de l'école d'Alliance Israélite Universelle, Monsieur Silberstein, 9 novembre 1925

<sup>180</sup> MAE, 50/196, #146, du général Gamelin, au Haut-Commissaire, “Rapport sommaire sur les événements qui se sont déroulés à Damas les 18-19-20 Octobre 1925,” 30 octobre 1925.

camp to loot, taking advantage of the fact that rebels were in the same neighborhood. It is also noteworthy that the corpses of the victims were not all found in the camp.<sup>181</sup>

The bombardment of Damascus began shortly after and continued for 48 hours. In parallel, a fire broke out that destroyed entire neighborhoods and the Hamidiye Bazar during the next two days. Reportedly about 1,450 Muslim Syrians lost their lives.<sup>182</sup> The damage done as a result of the bombardment and the fire is documented in the French archives held in La Courneuve, estimated to amount to about 60 million francs.<sup>183</sup>

Internal reports by the French authorities established that abusive authority, unjustified brutality, humiliations, and punishment, added to corruption and looting, were the main causes of the uprising.<sup>184</sup> However, to save face, and justify the bombardment of Damascus, especially for the international public, the events were presented otherwise. Soon, the bombardment was justified by the necessity to protect the Christians who were about to be massacred. Hence, the incident at the Armenian refugee camp offered an excellent pretext, if presented in the ‘right’ way, for the bombardment. For example, *Le Petit Parisien*, reporting on the bombardment, had the following telling title “The bombardment saved the Christians.”<sup>185</sup>

The logic was the same as it had been in the case of the other two incidents, Aleppo and Beirut, discussed in Part I. On these occasions, Christian Armenians were used to demonstrate the fanaticism and backwardness of the Muslim Syrians.

Numerous accounts, including Armenian ones, testify that Christians, including Armenians, were not targeted by the rebels either prior to the bombardment or afterward. Instead, other reasons, including the French fears that Damascus would fall into the hands of the rebels, insufficient French military forces, and their failure to push the rebels back, were identified. For example, a British intelligence source shared by Chamberlain gave the following account. “A rebel group had successfully penetrated Damascus, where some inhabitants had joined them. Anarchy, looting, and robbery were everywhere; the French lost their heads,

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<sup>181</sup> In the camp only 18 bodies were found, 10 more bodies were found between the camp and the train station, 2 bodies in Suwayda, 1 in Homs, 7 others in Zabadani, in total 50. ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damascusi, 13.

<sup>182</sup> Other accounts put that number up to 10,000, see *Turk Sozev* (Adana), cited in “Suriakan Depkere, Katsutyune Damascusi Mej, Nor Manramasnutyunner” [The Syrian Events, The Situation in Damascus, New Details], *Yerevan*, November 8, 1925, 1.

<sup>183</sup> See, for example, MAE, 50/195, telegramme N: 481-485, Bayreuth November 4, 1925, signé Sarrail, where it is mentioned that the greatest damage has been done in the territory between Hamidiye and Midhat pasha, including the destruction of the historic Azeem Palace, the house of Al-Bakri, a local notable and Aref-Waoutli.

<sup>184</sup> MAE, vol 50/234, Le Conseiller Daclin charge de mission en Syrie à Mr. Le ministre des affaires étrangères et à Mr. Le Haut-Commissaire de la république française en Syrie et au Liban, Paris, 7 septembre 1926, 57.

<sup>185</sup> “Inch Kegre ‘Petit Barizeni’ Tghtakitce ‘Rembakotsotyune Perketc Kristonyannerin” [What is Reporting *Le Petit Parisien*: The Bombardment Saved the Christians], *Yerevan*, November 19, 1925, 4.

fearing a massive assault on Damascus, and started to bombard the city immediately.”<sup>186</sup> The French had even failed to inform the foreign representatives and embassies to evacuate their citizens, which showed how hastily the decision had been made. Chamberlain even mentioned that their sources reported Bolshevik and Turkish intrigues in Syria. This account is almost identical to the one Sarrail sent to Paris on October 25.

Sarrail mentions the infiltration of the rebels into the Shaghur and Meidan neighborhoods of Damascus despite French efforts to prevent it. He then mentioned how the rebels had demanded that the inhabitants should join them, which the latter had done willingly.<sup>187</sup> At about 2.00 pm, the Armenian camp was on fire; he did not mention an attack! The camp was burning, and some local people went there to loot. All the shops in the neighborhoods of Meidan and Bab al-Museila suffered the same fate – robbed and looted. The Armenian camp had not been the only target. At 4.30 pm, there was the first violent clash between the crowd and a policeman, once again, nothing to do with the camp. Immediately, French families were evacuated, armored cars brought in, and the bombardment of the Shaghur neighborhood began. Further on in the report, Sarrail mentioned the Armenians again, “the Armenian refugee camp was burnt and looted, 17 bodies were found in the camp, while 300 refugees remained without shelter”... Finally, in his conclusions, Sarrail made it clear that the bombardment was necessary to expel the rebels and avoid Damascus falling into the hands of the nationalists, who were attempting to take over Damascus for the second time since the beginning of the Revolt.<sup>188</sup> It is noteworthy that Sarrail does not justify the bombardment as a necessity to protect the Christians. However, a few days later, he claimed this was so on the boat on his way to Paris to give explanations before the French Parliament. While at sea, he gave an interview to a reporter from the *Le Petit Parisien*, in which he declared, “What else was to be done? To let the rebels enter the city? To fight in the streets? To give a speech? If that had happened, then the blood would flow as it did during the Christian massacres of 1860.”<sup>189</sup> *Le Petit Parisien* published a lengthy account of the events, naturally defending the bombardment that had taken place in order to “protect the Christians, as well as the foreigners, instead of endangering their lives as wrongly claimed... it was not done to instill fear, only the houses of the rebels had been destroyed, which included no historical sites.”<sup>190</sup> Obviously,

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<sup>186</sup> MAE, vol. 50/194, #77 Fleuriau, Telegramme, Londres, 23 octobre 1925.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> MAE, vol. 50/194, #93- 96, Sarrail à le ministre des affaires étrangères, Beyrouth 25 Octobre 1925.

<sup>189</sup>“Suriakan Depkere: Katsutyune Damascuse Mej, Zoravar Sarayi Batcatrutyune” [The Syrian Events, Situation in Damascus, The Explanations of Sarrail], *Yerevan*, November 12, 1925, 1, 4.

<sup>190</sup> “What is Reporting *Le Petit Parisien*,” *Yerevan*, November 19, 1925, 4.

neither Sarrail nor any French sources that claimed the bombardment had saved the Christians mention that two Christian boys were killed in the Christian neighborhood, right in front of their house by the French forces sent “to protect the Christians.”<sup>191</sup>

Finally, the French records contain another account from The British *The Times* that specifically explains how and why the Armenian camp was burnt. It records in detail how a rebel group headed by Hasan al-Kharat had entered Shaghur and was soon joined by other rebels, who started to loot and rob the shops, occasionally shooting in the air to create a panic. Then, one of the groups entered the nearby Armenian refugee camp because it was said that Armenians had participated in the robbery and looting of the Arab villages a few days earlier and sold the booty in the market. “In reality, however, the robbers had not been Armenians but Circassian volunteers who sold their booty in the bazars freely afterward.” Then, the author related the story of the quarrel and the shooting. “However, for an unknown reason, the Druze held the Armenian refugees responsible for the previous looting... making them victims of a new injustice.” Soon shooting was heard from different parts of the city, and no one really knew what was happening. It seemed that the French believed many Damascenes had joined the revolt. Fearing their current military forces in the city were insufficient, they immediately employed tanks and artillery. Bombardment started at about 6.00 pm.<sup>192</sup>

The bombardment of Damascus was severely criticized abroad, many articles being devoted to it from London to Canada and from Lausanne to Kiev and Moscow. The French believed it was the result of the British and Soviet agitations against the French mandate.<sup>193</sup>

*The Times* article, published on October 27, whose correspondent reported directly from Damascus, naturally created much noise because it was the first international press report on the events. Many French press outlets quickly reprinted *The Times*. The main concern of the foreign press was the destruction of the historical sites as a result of the bombardment, including the famous Azeem palace, and the fact that the foreign consulates in Damascus had not been informed in advance; therefore, the lives and properties of the foreigners (Westerners) had been

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<sup>191</sup> It was said, that the French new forces that arrived with the tank, unaware of the city’s location of neighborhoods, they crossed the Christian neighborhood, shooting right and left to whose defense they were sent. Then, surprised that the city ended had asked where was the Christian neighborhood to find out that they were right there. The two boys were already shot dead and a third person was injured, see in Alice Poulleau, *A Damas*, 91, NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465, N :235, from American consulate of Damascus to the Secretary of State, “Outbreak in and Bombardment of Damascus,” October 26, 1925, 6.

<sup>192</sup> MAE, vol. 50/194, #131-139, # 133, “Les émeutes de Damas : relations complète des évènements, bombardement de la ville pendant 48 heures, destruction de monuments célèbres,” *Times*, Octobre 27, 1925.

<sup>193</sup> MAE, vol. 195, E412/1, campagne de presse contre l’action de la menace en Syrie, le Consul général de France au Canada, 2 décembre 1925.

in danger.<sup>194</sup> Another article appeared almost immediately in another British press outlet – *Daily Chronicles*, which gave the details of the bombardment, and claimed that Armenian armed volunteers had committed many atrocities. This article was cited in the Paris-based Armenian language communist organ *Yerevan*, which added that the French authorities had publicly denied these accusations against the Armenians.<sup>195</sup> It is noteworthy that *Yerevan*, which had been launched only recently (this was its 8<sup>th</sup> issue), reported side-by-side the news from Syria, “The War in Morocco,” “The Issue of Mosul,” “France and Turkey.”<sup>196</sup>

To the above-mentioned testimonies, we shall add that of Lutskiy, as given in his book devoted to the Syrian Revolt. Under the section “The bombardment of Damascus,” Lutskiy gave a detailed account of the Damascus outbreak of violence on October 18 and the events leading to the bombardment. The camp incident is not mentioned. Only at the end of his chapter does he mention the camp incident in the light of the failed French attempts to give a false sectarian character to the fighting by provoking a massacre of the Armenian refugees. According to him, the French tried to direct the rebel attack on the camp, and when this failed, they then tried to direct the rebel attack toward the Christian neighborhoods of Damascus by evacuating their armed forces from there, deliberately leaving them unprotected.<sup>197</sup> This information about the evacuation of French forces from Christian neighborhoods is also mentioned in the American confidential consular reports.<sup>198</sup>

The rest of the story is known; many Muslim notables and the rebels themselves protected the Christians so that no rebels entered the Christian neighborhoods. For this, the Syrian Muslims were praised by many international press outlets.<sup>199</sup> Other than the Armenian victims, no Christian-Muslim clash was reported, “no Christian was killed by the Muslim fanatics, but many Muslims, Christians, and Jews died as a result of the bombardment.”<sup>200</sup> Notably, even the French-subsidized *La Syrie* initially reported on the camp incident as “a fire in the Armenian neighborhood” not an assault. Moreover, it had claimed that the communists

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<sup>194</sup> MAE, vol. 50/194, #156, Télégramme, le ministre des affaires étrangères, “Article du ‘Times’ concernant le bombardement de Damas,” Paris, octobre 29, 1925; MAE, 50/194, #166, Annexe N.3, décanat du corps consulaire Damas, octobre 21, 1925.

<sup>195</sup> “Damascuse Parpavac, Qaghaki Rembakotsume, Hayeru koruste,” [Damascus Emptied, The Bombardment and the Armenian Losses], *Yerevan*, October 29, 1925, 1, 4.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>197</sup> Lutskiy, *Aravskiy Natsionalnaya Borba*, 230-231.

<sup>198</sup> NARA, Knabenshue to Kellogg, No. 2029, November 9, 1925, 890d.00/273, 1910-1929 CDF, RG 59, for local Catholic sources, see USNA Enclosures: “Destruction, Fire and Sword in Damascus,” by Elias Newman, and “The Bombardment of Damascus” by Dorinda Bowman, cited in Joel Veldkamp “Sectarian violence.”

<sup>199</sup> It included *L’Humanité* (October 28, 1925), *The Morning Post* (October 30, 1925), *The Manchester Guardian* (October 28, 1925). Cited in Lutskiy, *Aravskiy Natsionalnaya Borba*, fn. 76-82, 231,

<sup>200</sup> Lutskiy, *Aravskiy Natsionalnaya Borba*, 231.



had probably facilitated the entrance of the Druze into the city.<sup>201</sup> However, the story of the fire was soon exaggerated and described as an attempt to massacre the Christians. Similarly, *Pyunik* reported that hundreds of destitute Armenian refugees were arriving from Damascus, where they had lost everything as a result of the fire at the camp, the causes of which remained unknown.<sup>202</sup>

The ARF report, for its part, explicitly mentioned that, during all this chaos, which lasted for three days, local Muslim elites forbade the rebels from entering the Christian neighborhoods. They also protected many Armenians in their own houses.<sup>203</sup> The report gave an agency to the Armenian refugees in their success to protect themselves and minimize the number of victims by mentioning that the mob retreated after an Armenian refugee had shot at the attackers.<sup>204</sup> After the bombardment, Muslim elites were quick to demand a ceasefire, fulfilling the French demands of paying 100,000 Turkish lira and 2,800 rifles instead of the demanded 3,000.<sup>205</sup> It is noteworthy that the fine was to be paid by all the inhabitants of the town, Muslims and Christians alike, because the French authorities recognized that if the Christians were privileged and exempted from the payment as demanded by the Apostolic delegate, it would endanger their lives even further. Nevertheless, the Christians were to be reimbursed for their damaged properties at better rates than their Muslim counterparts.<sup>206</sup>

Two days later, on October 20, the chief Imam of Damascus, Bader Al-Din Al-Hassani, visited the Armenian prelacy in person to assure the Armenians that they need have no worries.<sup>207</sup>

The ARF report concluded that it was a spontaneous mob, lacking preparation and strategy, and that is why Armenians had managed to escape without too many deaths and injuries. The attitude of the Damascene Muslims was explained in the author's assertion that "the people here lacked any morality...treated all the questions with religious fanaticism and lacked any national or patriotic ideals."<sup>208</sup> The reporter, being a member of a prominent

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<sup>201</sup>“Verjin Teghekutyunner, Derutyune Damaskosi Mej [The Latest News, The Situation in Damascus], *Nor Pyunik*, October 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>202</sup> “Eghbayrakan Ognutyun” [Brotherly help], *Nor Pyunik*, October 24, 1925, 1.

<sup>203</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi, 12.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>205</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi,” 17. In fact, a report penned by a Syrian notable and held in La Courneuve describes how Damascene notables had to buy the rifles from the Circassians, Armenians, Kurds, Bedouins, and peasants at exaggerated prices paying between 5 and 10 Turkish liras, because in the whole Damascus only 30 rifles were found, see in MAE, vol. 195, Extrait d'une lettre d'un notable Muslim de Damas sur les événements des 18-22 octobre 1925, 10 novembre 1925, 2; See also Khoury, *Syria under the French*, 177.

<sup>206</sup> MAE, vol. 50/195, #257, de Duport à affaire étrangères, telegramme, Beyrouth 29 novembre 1925.

<sup>207</sup> “Suriakan Depkere, Hayeru Dirke” [The Syrian Events and the Position of the Armenians], *Yerevan*, October 12, 1925, 4.

<sup>208</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi,” 20.

revolutionary party that had long fought for the liberation of its people also judged the ability of the Syrian rebels, “who lacked carriage (*korov*). Despite being well-armed, the movement was crushed in its embryo, leaving the people demoralized.”<sup>209</sup> While the author asserted that new incidents were not expected, he stated that it was necessary for the Armenians to settle in safer regions.<sup>210</sup>

Considering the previous examples of the Aleppo and Beirut incidents, the headlines of the Parisian papers, the declarations of Sarraïl, the fact that not all the corpses were found in the camp, the publications right after the fire, as well as numerous testimonies that Christians were not attacked but protected, we tend to conclude that the incident of the Damascus refugee camp was not a planned massacre of the Christians but a spontaneous riot.

Because of the ensuing insecurity and uncertainty, Damascus would be emptied of its Armenian population within a year. From around 15,000 persons in 1925, the population dropped to just 1,200 persons in 1926. The Armenian community of Damascus would never recover; their number just before the recent Uprising of 2011 totaled about 5,000 persons.

### **Seeking the guilty**

On October 31, just days after the incident, Mikayel Natanian penned an article in *Arev*. He reported that the first article about “the units entirely composed of 500 Armenian volunteers under French control to fight against their host” had first appeared in the Turkish press and was then reprinted in the Arabic press.<sup>211</sup> Natanian also bitterly observed that:

Different parts of Syria revolted against the mandatory authority and fought only to reconcile later. *What is incomprehensible in this and also useless for the Syrians (annpatak Suracineri hamar) is the massacres of the unarmed Armenians.* Those Armenians who did not wish to interfere in the internal struggle of the Syrians were always grateful to the Syrians for their hospitality...<sup>212</sup>

According to him, the “misunderstanding” had happened partially because of Armenian ignorance:

Armenians had been too preoccupied with their daily bread and devoted no time to carefully study the environment and the people with whom they were obliged to live. They did not devote time to establishing closer relations with the important Syrian elements to ensure these people knew that Armenians were guests and could only observe strict neutrality in this internal struggle that had nothing to do with them. That the presence of a few Armenian gendarmes or volunteers did not mean active

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Natanian, “Surio Kharnakutyunnere ev Hayere,” [The Syrian Chaos and the Arm], *Arev*, October 31, 1925, 2.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. (Emphasized by the author).

participation by the community... Syrians may have issues with the mandatory power. But it is not for the Armenians to influence or participate in it. It is not only impossible for us but is also against our interests. Would the Syrians understand this? Do we have capable leaders to make it clear to the Syrians? <sup>213</sup>

Similarly, Topuzyan blamed the Syrian press and the French policies. According to him, the Syrian press did not correctly represent the Armenian participation but claimed the existence of armed units comprising *Circassians and Armenians*. While there was indeed one Circassian unit, there were no Armenian units. Many Western sources immediately reproduced these articles without checking them. Topuzyan explained that, after the first advance of the rebels, the French actively started to recruit local “volunteers,” offering a handsome monthly salary of 10 Ottoman gold. As a result, one unit composed of Circassians was formed.<sup>214</sup>

The main accusation against the “Armenian units,” such as those made by the Syrian-Palestinian Committee to the LoN (Accusation N. 6), blamed the French authorities for using Circassian and Armenian volunteers. “Circassians undertook an operation on 14 October and were allowed to take a great amount of booty, notably carpets, which they were allowed to sell.” The accusations against the Armenians were much worse, “Armenians led by Jacquies, the deputy of B  j  an, had massacred Muslim men in Meidan neighborhood, and stole jewelry of the Muslim women by cutting their hands or fingers.”<sup>215</sup> The French explanation for this accusation was the following, “it was only natural that the French relied on loyal forces to fight against the rebels...Circassians, by the way, had been used for several years... their actions were largely provoked by the inhabitants... while in Meidan, about 45 Armenians were brutally killed after having been stabbed by kitchen knives.” Moreover, the report claimed that wartime laws had been applied, and such barbaric acts had only been observed in a few isolated cases, which were strictly punished. The report concluded that the Circassians were never allowed to take any booty and sell it while the Armenians never cut the hands or fingers of the Damascenes.<sup>216</sup> We know from multiple accounts that Circassians were, indeed, involved in selling booty in the Christian neighborhoods. This makes us think that some Armenian volunteers committed crimes, even if “it was in some isolated cases.”

There is a hint of this in another French report, which again interpreted the clash from the sectarian point of view. It stated that “extremists, convinced that their political aspirations

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<sup>213</sup> M. Natanian, “Surio Kharnakutyunnere.”

<sup>214</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 40-41.

<sup>215</sup> MAE, 50/233, #43, 14, secret, le G  n  ral Gamelin,    le Haut-Commissaire (cabinet militaire), “R  ponse aux accusations port  es par les p  titions syriennes contre le Commandement Fran  ais,” Beyrouth, 7 juin 1926.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

had failed, started to give a religious character to the conflict using all kinds of disputes. One such dispute took place on October 17 (just one day before the camp incident) in Meidan, where certain pro-French Armenians (*Arméniens engagés parmi nos partisans*) had run an exaggerated campaign among the Muslim shopkeepers (*avaient commis quelques excès pour mener une vive campagne auprès des commerçants Musulmans*). Consequently, Muslim shopkeepers closed their shops as a sign of protest for two full days, October 20–21. The report specified that the guilty Armenians were punished immediately while the attitude of the rest of the French troops had been correct – they instilled fear in the rebels on the one hand and protected the property of the civilians on the other. The discourses pronounced in the two largest mosques in Damascus were recalled to testify to the correct attitude of the French troops. In both mosques, the religious chiefs had reportedly called for calm despite the aggressive actions of the nationalists.<sup>217</sup>

On January 14, 1926, *Arev* reported again, “there are no Armenian units, and there will be none.”<sup>218</sup> Although reportedly 80 Armenian volunteers served under the French flag, unlike the Circassians, there were no units in Syria composed entirely of Armenians. Yet, it is noteworthy that Circassian and Armenian volunteers are mentioned side-by-side in all sources, and the confusion between the two is great. There is an explanation for this; neither community was native to Syria, the first being resettled there at the end of the 19th century by the Ottoman authorities, while the latter had arrived recently due to the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, both communities were primarily Turkish speaking. During the interwar years, it was a common trend to consider any Turkish-speaking person in Syria to be an Armenian. According to *Arev*, the confusion between the two communities was largely due to the language.<sup>219</sup> Further details about the Circassian squadron are given in Colonel Raynal’s account, according to which there was only one such unit, composed of 120 Circassians and headed by Captain Collet. Notably, the report praised the bravery of the Circassians, who fought in the most dangerous places, as a result of which half the squadron was killed, and the survivors wounded at least once.<sup>220</sup>

Furthermore, as shown in a detailed French account, such Circassian units were nothing new in Syria; they had existed during the Ottoman times under French command after the French arrival in Syria. Circassians had been famous for their fighting skills since Ottoman

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<sup>217</sup> MAE, vol 50/197, #168, 6, Du Haut-Commissaire à Le ministre des affaires étrangères, Bulletin de quinzaine N : 5 du Cabinet du Haut-Commissaire, Beyrouth, 2 mars 1926.

<sup>218</sup> Editorial, “Chkan ev Chpetk e Ellan,” [There are None and There Will be None], *Arev*, January 14, 1926, 1.

<sup>219</sup> Own reporter, “Surio Hayots Kacutyune,” [The Conditions of the Arm. in Syria], *Arev*, March 18, 1926, 1.

<sup>220</sup> MAE, vol 50/237, #93, #97, Ministère des affaires étrangères, direction des affaires politiques et commerciales, Syrie, E-412- 2Abis, rapports à la Société des Nations, enquête du colonel Raynal, 3ème partie Damas, 1926.

times, but their settlement in Syria had also served a special purpose. They were relative newcomers in Syria; their mass migration to the Ottoman Empire had taken place in 1859–1860 after the Russian invasion of the northern Caucasus. The Ottoman authorities had settled them in blocs in different parts of the Empire, usually on the frontiers, in the places where control was needed. Some were settled on the Bulgarian frontier, and around 60,000 of them were resettled in Syria, on the banks of the Euphrates (Kurd Dagħ, vilayet of Aleppo), Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt and in 13 villages in and around Kuneitra to control/impede the communication between the Druze of Jabal al-Druze of Syria and Mount Hermon of Lebanon.

Traditionally, Circassians were employed in large numbers in the police and gendarmerie and often occupied high positions in the army. After the arrival of French troops in Syria, one Circassian unit was formed immediately to protect the northern Syrian borders from Turkish bandit attacks. This unit also played a major role in disarming the populations in the Aleppo vilayet, collecting more than 3,000 rifles. From 1923 onwards, the existence of the Circassian squadron was strongly criticized by the Syrian nationalists. On August 2, just days after the Syrian uprising of 1925, 40 new Circassians had joined the French forces from the villages of Kuneitra. Meanwhile, the Circassian squadron of Aleppo, composed of 120 men, was transferred to Damascus. Furthermore, the so-called Garde Mobiles, the main force fighting against the rebels, was almost entirely composed of Circassians. The French praised the importance of the French-Circassian cooperation during the revolt, while the Ottoman-era resettlement tactic of having Circassian villages between the two Druze groups of Jabal al-Druze and Hermon proved crucial in the crushing of the revolt, as explained by the French.<sup>221</sup>

Not surprisingly, the French report concluded that the Circassians were unpopular among the Syrians, who started to blame them for the failure of the uprising. The report cautioned that most of the accusations tended to be exaggerated and biased.<sup>222</sup> It is telling that in the entire collection of reports on the Revolt, consisting of a few thousand files held in La Courneuve, there are several detailed notes on the Circassian units but nothing about Armenian units. Instead, information about the Armenian fighters or the camp incident is rare, scattered, and incomplete. French praise for the Circassians as well as the successful French-Circassian cooperation is in stark contrast to the French depiction of the French-Armenian Légion as a “crime.”

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<sup>221</sup> MAE vol 50/237, #177, 178, 239, Captain Collet, “Note sur les Tcherkesse;” “Notice générale sur les Tcherkesse.”

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

Another French report sent to Paris explicitly mentioned that local militias comprising Bedouins, Circassians, and Kurds were recruited to fight against the rebels, which not only saved the lives of French soldiers but, in general, gave excellent results.<sup>223</sup> These achievements along with the bravery of the Circassians and their fearless leader – Capitaine Collet, both of whom were instrumental in containing the Revolt, are praised by Yves Salkin.<sup>224</sup> The author cites the French military archives and the orders given specifically to the “Tcherkesses de Collet” and their successful implementation.<sup>225</sup> The role of the Circassian escadron as the Syrian mobile forces in fighting against the tchévés and later against the Druze has been also explained by Mizrahi.<sup>226</sup>

From where, then, came the accusations regarding the Armenian volunteers? American consular reports sent regularly from Damascus to Washington have several records on the Armenian participation. One of the reports, for example, stated that the villages in Ghuta were robbed, and the general belief was that it could only have been done by the Armenian refugees, without having any proof.<sup>227</sup> Other sources, such as the eyewitness account of Alice Poulleau, who worked as a teacher in the American school in Damascus, and kept a diary reporting the events day-by-day, are important, too. She had an entry on September 26, 1925 that read:

Armenians are regarded badly these days... It is said that Sarrail wishes to exterminate the Damascenes and replace them with the Armenians, who are more obedient and loyal to the French. It sounds stupid, but it seems to originate from ill-formulated thoughts expressed by certain French, and in this country, one word, one speech is enough. That's why Armenians fear reprisals...<sup>228</sup>

Other rumors claimed that the French intended to drive all the Druze population out of the Jabal Druze and settle Armenian refugees instead. According to Edmond Rabbath, the

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<sup>223</sup> MAE, 50/195, #200, Du Riffiye à Monsieur Berthelot, Secrétaire General du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Beyrouth, 28 novembre 1925, 10.

<sup>224</sup> Yves Salkin, *Collet au galop des Tcherkesses* (Economica : Paris, 1999).

<sup>225</sup> The names of those Circassian officers killed during the fights and provided in the account are all Circassian names. Ibid, 50, 51, 42-50. We have been unable to find any account that would provide all the names and the ethnic composition of this battalion.

<sup>226</sup> Mizrahi explains that, unlike the Armenian Legion which was dissolved in 1920, the Syrian legion composed of Arabs was further enlarged. In July 1921 it counted about 6,000 men remaining solid until 1927 when it was reorganized and rebaptized under the name “Troupes auxiliaire du Levant”. Since there was a need for another type of mobile force that could fight against the irregular Turkish forces especially in Aleppo vilayet, French authorities formed in July 1922 a small brigade composed of Circassians headed by Collet. Not only this brigade proved successful against the Turkish *tchévés* but also during the Syrian Revolt as a guerilla force. Although later other ethnicities (Ismailites and Kurds) were also recruited to serve in this mobile force its core remained Circassian (at least 30%). Mizrahi does not mention Armenians. See in Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire: Service des renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Sorbonne : Paris, 2003), 133,134.

<sup>227</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465 (3-4), N :234, from American consulate to the Secretary of State, “Developments in the Political Situation Leading up to the Bombardment,” October 25, 1925, 6.

<sup>228</sup> Poulleau, *A Damas*, 62-63.

famous Alepine Christian nationalist, it was not a mere rumor but an actual declaration made by Sarrail in Damascus in front of certain local notables.<sup>229</sup>

Reports kept in the ARF archives in Watertown (Boston) also attribute a greater role to the rumors and newspapers. One of the ARF reports had also stated clearly, that although the Syrian unrest was against the French mandate, it was also considerably unfriendly towards the Armenians, who were identified as French protégés.<sup>230</sup> Yet another ARF report mentioned that, since the early days of the rebellion, there had been anti-Armenian discourse and especially many rumors. According to these rumors, the French intended to settle Armenians in the Druze region after driving them out.<sup>231</sup> Other rumors claimed that Armenians were taken in large numbers as volunteers to fight against the Syrians. Yet others claimed that Circassian volunteers were Armenians because only they could have been so brutal against the Muslims and only they could have been attracted by the opportunity of getting some booty.<sup>232</sup> The reporter did not have a definite answer as to who spread such rumors. He suggested that it could be the work of Turkish agents who were against the Armenian presence in Syria, but it could also be entirely an effort by the Syrians who wished to get rid of the Armenians who were in competition with them and were supported by the French. It could also be that, by targeting only Armenians and not the other Christian minorities, rebels wished to avoid any united Christian action.<sup>233</sup>

The observation that rumors played a significant role in provoking the attack is shared by everyone. The rumors were spread in the newspapers and orally. As observed by the eyewitness Alice Poulleau, “one word, one speech is enough in this country,” and that, “although it sounded stupid, it seemed to originate from ill-formulated thoughts expressed by certain French”<sup>234</sup> The role of the rumors was so great during the entire revolt (and beyond) that even the American consul of Damascus complained in one of his reports, that there was only one newspaper, which was entirely controlled by the French, as compared to six newspapers previously, and even the rumors had become scarce.<sup>235</sup> Recent research by Jordi Tejel has equally established the importance of rumor in the light of press censorship and lack of

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<sup>229</sup> Rabbath, “L’insurrection syrienne,” 425, he cites a French intelligence source; ARF archives, “Teghekgagir Damaskosi.”

<sup>230</sup> ARF archives, Fond E, file 973, N: 52, From Lernavayr to the ARF Central Bureau, November 12, 1925, 2.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>234</sup> Alice Poulleau, *A Damas*, 63.

<sup>235</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465 (1-4), N: 27, “Memorandum on the Political Situation in the Damascus Consulate District,” December 21, 1925, 2.

information during the interwar period.<sup>236</sup> Indeed, a total news blackout prevailed in Damascus, and communication reverted to the old standby of rumor, “the operative mode of any insurgency and the operative mode of a population under military occupation.”<sup>237</sup> The newspapers were forbidden to publish anything about the Revolt except information received from the French High Commissioner. Even the most pro-French elements recognized that the censorship (either via subventions or pressure) was so great that it had become a key governmental tool.<sup>238</sup>

The Armenian Catholicos Sahak II, in his turn, complained bitterly to the Armenian Central Refugee Council in Paris that, although the French knew that the circulating news about the “armed Armenian bands” was fabricated, they failed to deny it officially.<sup>239</sup>

Alice Poulleau, an ardent critic of French policies and close to many local Damascenes, was struck by the contrast between the official news disseminated by *La Syrie* newspaper and the reality to which she was an eyewitness. As explained by her, the contradictions were so great that she decided to undertake a fact-finding mission on October 27.<sup>240</sup> According to her collected facts, there was even a controversy about why Damascus had been bombarded. While all French-sponsored news outlets and the French officials claimed that the bombardment had been done to protect the Christians, the Christian inhabitants of Meidan had told her that even the Christian houses were not spared. As a response to their complaints to the chief of police, they were told, “You are all Syrians.”<sup>241</sup> An American consular report also stated that one of the first bombs had fallen on the Irish Presbyterian Missionary School.<sup>242</sup>

Poulleau’s account of the reasons behind the attack on the Armenian camp differs from that of other sources. Contrary to the accounts that mention the participation of the Armenian volunteers in the punitive actions, she was told that “Armenians had become hated by the inhabitants of Meidan, for having boosted their authority as pro-French, the attack, therefore, had aimed to show them their true place” (*ils s'étaient rendus odieux aux Midanais en se targuant de leur autorité de partisans français pour exiger des dispositions comme un tribut qui leur était dû*).<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Jordi Tejel, “States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925–1945,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 37:1, 95-113; also Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, “Republic of Conspiracies: Cross-Border Plots and the Making of Modern Turkey, 1919-1939,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (April 2020), 1-22.

<sup>237</sup> Michael Provence, *The Syrian Great Revolt*, 60.

<sup>238</sup> MAE, vol. 50/195, E410, de Badri Talih à le ministre des affaires étrangères, 7 novembre 1925, 2.

<sup>239</sup> Yeghiayan, *Zhamanakakits Patmutyun*, 265-266.

<sup>240</sup> Poulleau, *A Damas*, 117-118.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>242</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465, N:235, From American consulate of Damascus to the Secretary of State, “Outbreak in and Bombardment of Damascus,” October 26, 1925, 4 (24.)

<sup>243</sup> Poulleau, *A Damas*, 121.



It is clear that the accusation passed over to Poulleau resulted from the French sectarian policies in Syria and towards the Armenians, in particular. A telling example was the French handling of the Syrian and Armenian communists after their arrests when the Armenians were told that their interests were opposed to those of the local Muslims. In the later chapters, we shall see how, at times, anti-refugee sentiments were provoked by the French.<sup>244</sup>

It seems natural that the recruitment of the Armenian refugees, who had arrived in Syria only recently, into the local militias, even in small numbers, had created suspicion. Topuzyan asserted that “the peaceful life of these refugees was hindered by the French, who played a double game... They tried to create hatred and conflict between the Arabs and the Armenians on the one hand and obtain allies on the other’.<sup>245</sup> This view was also shared by the American consul reporting from Damascus to Washington after the bombardment of Damascus. A memorandum dated December 3, 1925, was titled “Menace of a civil war in Syria” and expressed similar fears:

For years... French so permanently proclaimed that they were in the Levant for the sole reason of extending their protection to the Christian inhabitants of the countries concerned... the truth is, on many occasions, she neglected her supposed duty, and her policy proved to give rise to a civil war among the inhabitants of the country... To realize the true results of their undertaking, it would seem that they not only create hatred between the various races that are dwelling in the country *but that they transform the Christian element into the victim of any probable event.*<sup>246</sup>

The same memorandum also gives numerous examples of the French dealings with the other Christian villages, including Ma'alula, located on the outskirts of Damascus. For example, when the inhabitants of Ma'alula asked the French authorities to protect them from the rebels, who were demanding food and money, the French solution was to arm the villagers instead of sending troops or reconciling the sides. In the meantime, the rebels burned and looted the entire village after receiving a negative reply to their demands. This action had resulted in one community turning against another.<sup>247</sup> The report drew a comparison with the French activities in Cilicia that had incited hatred and hostility between the Armenians and Turks. In addition, it referred to the articles in the French-subsidized newspapers, such as *La Syrie*, which tried to give a religious character to the conflict.<sup>248</sup> The report ends with a handwritten note saying that “it seemed that the French stopped arming the Christians and had changed their policy.” Yet

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<sup>244</sup> See for example, the story of the “Armenian home” in Syria discussed in Part IV.

<sup>245</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune*, 25.

<sup>246</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465 (1-4), American consular service, Beirut, report memorandum, “Menace of a Civil War in Syria,” November 22, 1925, 1 (1219). (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

another report mentioned rumors that the French authorities had even distributed money to certain persons to spread the news that would prove that “Moslem fanaticism is at the bottom of this trouble.”<sup>249</sup>

Aware of French intentions to give the conflict a religious character, Al-Atrash wrote a letter to the American consul on November 27, 1925. The authentication of the letter was confirmed by the American consulate, and the translation of the original text is kept in the American confidential consular files. Signed as “The Leader of the Armies of the Syrian National Revolution – Sultan Atrash,” it read,

We have heard that some of the newspapers in the hire of our enemies are fabricating false news about our Syrian National Revolution, alleging that it is a war against the native Christians in our beloved Syria, whereas, as your Excellency knows already and as is known to all impartial and fair-minded men of the Occident, our revolt is the result of the atrocities committed by France’s colonizing agents who violated the sacred rights of our country. One among the evils our enemies have recently made, that of distributing arms to the Christians to be used to fight us, has hurt (touched) our Christian brethren who lost their heads and began attacking our army which was following the enemy. Our good intentions have been evidenced by the fact that not one of the peaceable citizens has been touched in the numerous places in which our army already entered... We feel that we are all brethren in humanity and that Syria is for the Syrians regardless of their religion and faiths. We are innocent of the Christian blood that has been shed because we did not attack the Christians but they have been killed by the very arms they received from the French Government and with which they killed their brethren who have risen to liberate the country in which we all live... We make no distinction in religion or sects (community) as our only aim is to obtain our legal rights which belong equally to the sons of Syria whosoever they be.<sup>250</sup>

This letter is significant for several reasons; for our purposes, its assertion that rebels cannot be blamed for shedding Christian blood is of special importance. In fact, as reported by Topuzyan, Armenians in Damascus had refused to take the arms distributed by the French and were officially neutral in this conflict. Although Al-Atrash fails to explain the Armenian camp incident, his account that Christians, including Armenians, were not targeted is accurate and appears in several other accounts, namely ARF reports, American consular confidential reports, and Russian sources. According to *Suriakan Mamul*, 22 Armenians who had left Jabal al-Druze to work returned to Damascus without any incident, robbery, or difficulty. No Armenians living

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<sup>249</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465 (1-4), N:12, From J.H. Keeley, American consul, “Memorandum on the Political Situation in the Damascus Consular District,” December 4, 1925, 3 (85).

<sup>250</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465 (1-4), N: 10, from J. H. Keeley, American consul, “Memorandum on the Political Situation in the Damascus Consular District, The Letter from Sultan Pasha Atrash,” Damascus, December 2, 1925 (91).

in the region had been treated badly or targeted. The rebels of Damascus were advised to learn from the Druze “*they have revolted against the government, not the refugees.*”<sup>251</sup>

Historian Laura Robson, for her part, explained the violence against the Armenian refugees during the Revolt as a result of the French policies vs. the Armenian refugees “whose physical and political separation from the Syrian Arab society” was ensured by the French mandatory authorities from the start.<sup>252</sup> Armenian refugees, upon their arrival in Syria and Lebanon, had been granted citizenship and voting rights. They were also granted easier access to the office of the French High Commissioner and other French services than their Syrian counterparts, giving the Armenians a false feeling of being privileged. This, in turn, had encouraged many Armenians, including the political elite, to refer to the French first for any small matter instead of handling issues with the local authorities. Unsurprisingly, this considerably irritated the Syrian hosts and contributed to the Armenian refugees being identified with the French authorities, even if they were not.

By positioning themselves as intermediaries, the French authorities created artificial tensions between the Armenians and the local Arabs and aimed to make the Armenian refugees feel constantly vulnerable and insecure, and in need of protection. This was done because the French authorities suspected growing British and especially American influence over the Armenian refugees.<sup>253</sup> These suspicions were partly rooted in the past. The Armenians did not trust the French after the Cilicia withdrawal, and Armenian Protestants had an influential position over the Armenian community in Aleppo. Most of them were graduates from Aintab or Beirut Protestant colleges, and it was only natural that they sympathized with the Americans. The French authorities were equally alarmed about the growing British influence over the Armenian refugees, which could quickly spread to the entire community if left unchecked.<sup>254</sup> The French claimed that such influence was spread primarily through charity organizations providing relief.<sup>255</sup> Therefore, the refugees were constantly reminded that they were vulnerable and only France was in a position to protect them.

According to this logic, direct contact and negotiations with the Arab counterparts should be avoided. The French were to be the intermediaries between the two. To start with, the French authorities cut any direct communication channels between the two communities.

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<sup>251</sup> Martuni “Damaskosi Nerkin Kyanken,” [Damascene Internal Life], *Suriakan Mamul*, November 25, 1925, 2. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>252</sup> Laura Robson, *The Politics of Mass Violence*, 73.

<sup>253</sup> CADN-SL 573, Lamothe à Le Haut-Commissaire, 7 décembre 1923; CADN-SL 575, Dossier, “Les Arméniens à Damas,” Beyrouth, 1924.

<sup>254</sup> CADN-SL 573, De Lamothe à Le Haut-commissaire, Alep, 7 Décembre 1923.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

One such important channel was the Armenian-Arab friendship committee established after the February events in Aleppo (1919) when 100 Armenian refugees were killed by a mob.<sup>256</sup> This was a high-level committee represented by the Arab military governor and the mufti from the Syrian side and the Armenian prelacy and intellectuals. The committee aimed to solve any misunderstandings between the communities and avoid any bloody clashes in the future.<sup>257</sup> Whether intentionally or not, this committee was the first body to be dissolved after the arrival of the French. According to the mandatory power, Armenians no longer needed any such committees since the French would ensure their security and prosperity. The events of October 1925 proved the opposite. Not only were Armenians not protected by the French during the Revolt, but on the contrary, they were also occasionally targeted by the French soldiers. For example, on December 19, 1925, an Armenian moneychanger was attacked and robbed in Damascus by French soldiers (Algerians) during the daytime.<sup>258</sup> When a group of merchants complained to B ej an, the chief of French police (an Armenian), he not only refused to punish the soldiers but refused to listen to the complaint, declaring that “when a French soldier committed any slight offense people were quick to complain, but nothing is said when rebels enter the city.”<sup>259</sup> Finally, shortly after the camp incident, Reffye, the secretary of the High Commissioner reported to Paris that “The recent events (Damascene incident?) have placed them (the Armenian refugees) firmly under our control.”<sup>260</sup>

Were the claims and the rumors about the armed Armenian volunteers justified? Did the camp incident happen because of the Armenian volunteers? Finally, was there any ARF interference behind the armed groups?

### **Was there ARF interference?**

On July 29, 1925, just days after the outbreak of the rebellion, a circular was sent from the ARF central bureau of Syria to all its members in Syria and Lebanon. It called on them to be cautious given the ongoing events in Syria and warned of possible attacks on the defenseless Armenian refugee camps by various armed groups that could happen mainly for robbery. It instructed its members “to organize the self-defense of the local Armenians secretly, with local forces and

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<sup>256</sup> More on this mob and Aleppo massacres see Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s Christians and the Formation of the Syrian Nation-State, 1920-1936,” (unpublished PhD diss., Graduate Institute, Geneva, 2021).

<sup>257</sup> M. Natanian, “Hay-Arab Komitner Suro Mej” [Armenian-Arab Committees in Syria], *Arev*, April 4, 1924, 1.

<sup>258</sup> NARA, Confidential files, vol. 465, (1-4), N: 32, 1 and N: 33, 3, from Keeley to Beirut and Aleppo, “Memorandum on the Political Situation in the Damascus Consular District,” December 31, 1925.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, N: 32, 1; Poulleau, *A Damas*, 148.

<sup>260</sup> MAE/P, SDN, 1802, #55-59, P. Verch ere de Reffye au D epartement, 12 octobre 1926.

according to the local requirements, to establish ties with the local French authorities and ensure the safety of the local Armenians....”<sup>261</sup> The circular instructed its members to report back regularly and concluded that “with these instructions in place, we can be sure to keep our people far from the undesirable surprises.”<sup>262</sup> The “undesirable surprise” would take place three months later. What were the ARF measures undertaken for “self-defense?” What do the ARF archives reveal in this regard?

One of the reports reaching the ARF Central Bureau from Damascus reported that the situation in the city had been particularly tense since the outbreak of the rebellion; there were demonstrations on Fridays and attacks in the Christian neighborhoods.<sup>263</sup> *Nor Pyunik* had reported at the beginning of September that Armenians in Damascus were extremely alarmed after receiving the news that rebels aimed to take over the city. Although the movement was not directed at them, former experiences had taught them otherwise.<sup>264</sup> Noteworthy, *Nor Pyunik* regularly reported on the events in Jabal al-Druze, which usually appeared on the last pages and tended to include the news from French-controlled sources, usually from Paris. It seemed the paper did not give enough importance to these events, often employing the same vocabulary used in the French press, presenting the events as an insignificant local uprising that had almost been crushed. For example, at the beginning of October, just days before the camp incident, it had published a piece titled “Final subordination,” which reported that Suwayda was ruined and the rebellion contained.<sup>265</sup> In the following days, it became clear, that neither Suwayda was taken, nor was the rebellion crushed. Hence, the ARF leaders planned to move the Armenian refugees from the Kadim camp elsewhere and convened a meeting on October 18.<sup>266</sup> The same day, there was an outbreak of violence in Damascus. The report put the entire blame of the camp incident on the Armenian priest Father Vahan who had refused to shelter the refugees of Kadim in the church finding their fears exaggerated.<sup>267</sup>

What had the ARF done to prevent any such attack? From an ARF report, it becomes evident that the rebels, and Al-Atrash, in particular, had established contacts with the ARF representatives, and a secret agreement had been achieved between them, “Al-Atrash sent several Armenian delegates from Jabal Druze to meet with the head of the Armenian prelacy

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<sup>261</sup> ARF archives, Fond E, file 973, N: 69: “Circular,” to all the members in Syria [Ays shrjakerakani ughutyunn e Siriyai mer bolor marminnrerin], July 29, 1925.

<sup>262</sup> ARF archives, Fond E, file 973, N: 69: “Circular.”

<sup>263</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi,” 1-2.

<sup>264</sup> Editorial, “Fransian Surio Mej,” [France in Syria], *Nor Pyunik*, September 2, 1925, 1.

<sup>265</sup> “Jabal Druzi Depkeru Shurj,” [About the Events in Jabal Druze], *Nor Pyunik*, October 3, 1925, 4.

<sup>266</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi,” 1-2.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

and ask that Armenians do not join the volunteer units formed against them.”<sup>268</sup> Moreover, comrade Vrej, a member of the Damascene ARF committee ensured that a letter was sent to the Leader (Arajnord) “to inform him about the neutrality of the Armenians, demanding security for the Armenians in exchange... We treat this information with *absolute secrecy since it may endanger Armenians in front of the French.*”<sup>269</sup>

This piece of information is significant in that it not only shows that there were ties and even a secret agreement between the ARF and Al-Atrash, but also demonstrates that ARF was far from being a tool in the hands of the French, as claimed by the Soviet historians.<sup>270</sup> It turns out, then, that two separate segments of the Armenians – the communists and the ARF, were in touch with the rebels, the first with the commitment to support the rebels, the second with an agreement to keep neutrality. This raises an important question as to why the Armenian refugees were then attacked and massacred. Was there a lack of communication between al-Atrash and the Damascene rebels, or was it an individual initiative of the rebel leader heading the attack? Notably, the rebel group that attacked the camp was headed by Hasan al-Kharrat, the former night guard in Damascus and the most famous Damascene *qabadäy* (quarter thug from the quarter of Shaghur).<sup>271</sup> As testified by Alice Poulleau, the rumors about Armenians were also spread chiefly by the “concierge” although she did not provide any names: “*les gens se montent la tete avec des racontars de concierge...*”<sup>272</sup> The sources remain silent on the motives of Al-Kharrat for spreading such rumors. The ARF report mentioned that, afterward, fearing a repetition of the attacks, self-defense was initiated and proudly asserted that ARF was the only force to think of it.<sup>273</sup>

*Arev*, on the other hand, reported that the attack happened after Dr. Shahbander had confirmed to foreign journalists the existence of an Armenian unit of about 500 soldiers.<sup>274</sup> Since Dr. Shahbander had formed a revolutionary government with Al-Atrash, he ought to know about the secret agreement achieved between him and the ARF and the latter’s commitment to refrain from military service under the French flag. So, what is the origin of the tale of an Armenian unit of 500 soldiers in the service of the French? Was it purely rumor? It turns out that it was not. In fact, on September 12, *Nor Pyunik* reported the existence of about 500 Armenian soldiers recruited in Istanbul, Izmir, and Syria to serve under the French flag in

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 7. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>270</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnaksutyune*, 49.

<sup>271</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 174-176.

<sup>272</sup> Poulleau, *A Damas*, 63.

<sup>273</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damascusi,” 17.

<sup>274</sup> Own corresp., “Surihay Katsutyune,” [The Situation of the Armenians in Syria], *Arev*, March 13, 1926, 1.

Algeria (not in Syria!). Those recruited were promised French citizenship in addition to attractive salaries after service of five years.<sup>275</sup> It was said that the prospect of French citizenship, in particular, had been attractive to many. It turns out the tale about the “Armenian unit of 500 soldiers” had a hidden side, rooted once again in the Soviet-ARF as well as Soviet-Western confrontation.

In October 1925, as events unfolded in Syria and Morocco, another important matter preoccupied the Soviet leaders in Moscow: it was the conference of Locarno on October 16, which later culminated in the Pact. This was a series of agreements signed by Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Italy to guarantee peace in Western Europe. Moscow interpreted this Pact as a new anti-Soviet bloc and a prelude to renewed foreign intervention against Russia.<sup>276</sup> The nervousness of the Soviets is also evident from the pages of newspapers consulted by us – *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, the official organ of the communist leaders of Soviet Armenia, and *Martakoch* – the mouthpiece of the Transcaucasian Central Administration in Tbilisi. The October issues of both newspapers were flooded with news about the meeting, and the discussions and later agreements were published and commented upon, usually on the front pages.<sup>277</sup>

This situation, unavoidably, also renewed and strengthened the struggle between the communists and the ARF since the latter was still perceived by Moscow as a “powerful instrument in the hands of the imperialists to fight against the Soviets.” Against this backdrop, the suggestion of the ARF to support the national liberation aspirations of the Kurdish people along with the Syrians and Moroccans during the meeting of the Communist International’s Congress held on August 23 in Marseille made the Bolsheviks furious.<sup>278</sup> The Congress was a major event attended by the representatives of 34 countries. The ARF, which attended the Congress as a member, publicly declared that “Armenians are obliged to join their forces with the brotherly Kurds to fight against the common enemy.”<sup>279</sup> Moreover, Nicol Aghbalian, who toured Syria and Lebanon in September 1925, declared “while Armenian refugees are everywhere, six Armenian vilayets are almost empty, inhabited by hardly 60–70,000 Kurds. In

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<sup>275</sup> “500 Hay Zinvorner Algeri Mej” [500 Armenian Soldiers in Algeria], *Nor Pyunik*, September 12, 1925, 3.

<sup>276</sup> Ivar Spector, *The Soviet Union*, 83.

<sup>277</sup> To name but a few: “Lokarnoyi Paymanagri Shurj,” *Martakoch*, October 20, 1925, 1; “Nrank Daverov, Menk Trnteskan Verelkov,” [*Martakoch*, October 22, 1925, 1; “Lokarnoyi Hamadzaynutyunner,” Ibid, 2; “Izvestia about the Agreement,” ibid, 2; “Lokarno Conference: Agreement on the 16<sup>th</sup> Article,” *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, October 16, 1925, 1; “Lokarnoyi Konfereance, Germanian Stipvats e Nor Zijumner Anel,” Ibid, October 17, 1925, 1; “Lokarnoyi Konferanse: Erkrordakan Hartcer Chen Lutsyum, Chamberlaine Haytarautyunner,” Ibid, October 18, 1925, 1; “Germanyi Kapitulyatcian Lokarnoyaum,” Ibid, October 20, 1925, 1; “Lokarnoyi Konferantsitsic Heto: UKHM-Germania Dashnagri Ardzagankner,” Ibid, October 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>278</sup> “Hogevarkayin Tsdabanutyunner” [Psychotic Argumentation], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, October 20, 1925, 1.

<sup>279</sup> Editorial, “Kerdakan Khndire” [The Kurdish Issue], *Nor Pyunik*, September 9, 1925, 1

Lebanon, we have received citizenship and identity cards but still live with the dream of Armenia... We shall agree that there is no place for us on the Earth similar to our own homeland. Human life is worthless if there is no big idea behind it.”<sup>280</sup>

Another article in the pages of *Nor Pyunik* hinted at Armenian support for the Kurdish uprising. It referred to Aghbalian’s speech and stated that the first shockwaves after the deportations were gone... The desire to reconquer the homeland was alive. “Why should the refugees think to dry the swamps and build irrigation channels (in Soviet Armenia) when their native lands are empty... Armenians shall strive to get back to their lands. The political revival of the Armenian youth is a reality, and the undisputed leader is the ARF.”<sup>281</sup> When the ARF reported on the increased British interest in the Kurdish revolt and the changed Kurdish attitude towards the Armenians, especially after the warm hospitality given to the Kurdish refugees in Tabriz by the local Armenians, which had reportedly become a discussion topic throughout Kurdistan, the Soviet suspicion seemed grounded.<sup>282</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Soviet authorities, soon accused the ARF of directing the attention of the refugees to the other side of the border... they had secretly infiltrated into the state apparatus and were preparing a revolt... with the aim of discrediting the Soviet authorities abroad. Such was the speech and the open accusations made by Sergo Ordzhonikidze, the First Secretary of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Republic.<sup>283</sup>

As we know, the Soviets did not support the Kurdish Sheikh Said rebellion, which started in February 1925. Unlike the Syrian and Riff uprising, the Soviets presented the Kurdish rebellion in a different light as an attempt to restore the backward religious khalifate in Turkey by fighting against the modernization efforts of the Kemalists. Interestingly, to reinforce their argument, the Soviet leaders criticized the ARF, who supported the Kurdish rebellion but was against the Riff rebellion in Morocco and the Druze rebellion in Syria, having instead sided with the French imperialists. Moreover, the ARF as a party was presented as being firmly tied to the politics of Western imperialism (*sertoren kapvats e imperialistakan Arevmutki kaghakanutyun het*)... thus the active working masses in the colonies abroad ought to expose the true face of the ARF as empty nationalism (*gaghutahay ashkhatavorutyun aveli aktiv*

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<sup>280</sup> “Enker Nicol Aghbalayani Banakhosutyune” [N. Aghbalian’s Lecture], *Nor Pyunik*, September 26, 1925, 1.

<sup>281</sup> Editorial, “Kaghakan Verzartnum,” [Political Revival], *Nor Pyunik*, October 7, 1925, 1.

<sup>282</sup> “Heghapokhakan Sharjume Kurdistani Mej,” [The Revol. Mov. in Kurdistan], *Nor Pyunik*, April 15, 1926, 2.

<sup>283</sup> Editorial, “‘Nationalism’ ev ‘Turkahayeru Hayactkner’: Orjonikedzei Jarin Artiv,” [‘Nationism and ‘the Thought of the Ottoman Armenians’: The Speech of Orjonikidze], *Nor Pyunik*, June 10, 1926, 1.



*tarrere petk e otagortsen dashnakizmi ayd tulutyune ev merkatchnen massaneri araj hay natsionalismi kataryal snankutyune*).<sup>284</sup>

The time-worn Soviet accusation that followed was predictable. The ARF was accused of having recruited Armenian volunteers to fight under the French flag against the local Syrians (as well as the Riff) who fought for their national liberation. Madoyan, for example, claimed that in Musa Ler (Alexandretta) the ARF leader, Movses Ter-Galustian, had called the Armenians to serve as volunteers in the French army and that, as a response, the communists had put up anti-French placards on the doors of the churches in Kheder Bek.<sup>285</sup>

Soon, both *Khorherdayin Hayastan* and *Martakoch* reported the death of 600 Armenian volunteers in the French army fighting in Morocco and Syria.<sup>286</sup> Moreover, both articles of *Martakoch* that appeared on October 22 and 23 on the front page were placed next to the news from Locarno. The first article claimed to reproduce the news on Armenian volunteers in the French service from *Paykar*, an Armenian Ramkavar organ published in Boston. The same news was also printed in *Khorherdayin Hayastan*.<sup>287</sup> The article stated that the French columns destroyed in Suwayda on August 3, 1925, had been composed of 600 Armenians and 40 French officers.<sup>288</sup> This short piece in *Paykar*, which, by the way, was wrong and unsigned, became a long article in the pages of *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, in October:

Six hundred Armenian youth had fought against the revolutionary Druze for the sake of French imperialism. ARF has done the same treacherous act as it used to do in all other Eastern countries. Two months ago, we reported about Armenian volunteers in Morocco. The same is being done in Syria. The misfortune of the Armenians abroad is their *inability to reject the ARF adventurism in the countries still under imperialist control*. The tragedy of our people is the fact that they join everywhere the armies of the imperialists, fighting everywhere against the people of the East, against payments, and awards... instead the people are being massacred... as was the case in Turkey. There are 150,000 Armenians in Syria. Without a doubt, the Syrians shall expel them, too, after having expelled the French. *As always, the people will pay the price for the actions of the few irresponsible adventurers*. The past will be repeated. Isn't it time to understand that the well-being of our people in the countries of the East, depends on *their peaceful cohabitation with the natives and the liberation of the East*.<sup>289</sup>

The second article in *Martakoch*, under the telling title of “Those who sell the blood of our youth,” criticized the ARF supporters more openly for being attracted by the salaries and

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 85.

<sup>286</sup> “Hay Mamul,” [Armenian Press], *Martakoch*, October 22, 1925, 1; “Hay Gaghtakanutyun Aryune Vajarki Hanoghner” [Those Who Sold the Blood of the Refugees], *Martakoch*, October 23, 1925, 1; Lynch, Editorial, “Bolshevik Garsheli Provokasine,” [The Bolshevik Disgusting Propaganda], *Nor Pyunik*, November 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>287</sup> We have not been able to consult the articles of *Paykar* or *Khorherdayin Hayastan*.

<sup>288</sup> “Hay Mamul.”

<sup>289</sup> Ibid. (Emphasized by the author).

awards provided by recruitment to maintain their party's existence. In order to discredit the ARF further, reference to the past was constantly made to show that ARF policy was nothing new. The ARF had done this in Greece against Turkey, for which the Armenian refugees of Greece had paid a high price; now, the same was happening in Syria. It was an organized crime that the Armenians in the colonies, especially those in Europe and the USA, must fight against.<sup>290</sup> Thus, the deportations of the last year in Greece were the fault of the ARF, and the article reminded the Armenians of Syria what awaited them. Was it a mere coincidence that a new HOK delegation was sent abroad “to awaken the Armenians of abroad... to save the masses from the claws of non-governmental organizations, charities, compatriotic and educational unions (*hayrenaktsakan ev kertasirats*), and the Red Crosses?”<sup>291</sup>

For the sake of justice, it should be noted that Armenian refugees were not targeted and killed in Suwayda and Jabal al-Druze, in general, during the entire uprising. Even ARF organ *New Pyunik* testified to this.<sup>292</sup> Ironically, Jabal al-Druze gained more Armenian inhabitants right after the disturbances in Damascus. From 1925–1926 there were about 100 families; by 1934, this figure had reached 123 who lived in Kuneitra, Deraa, and Suwayda. In 1940, the community counted 235 families (or 1,125 persons).<sup>293</sup> The alliance pattern between the Henchaks and Druze would continue in Beirut, in particular.<sup>294</sup>

Instead, the inter-Armenian struggle between the ARF and the Soviet authorities, as well as the overall geopolitical situation, had prompted the Soviet authorities to spread rumors of the “ARF-affiliated Armenian volunteers in the service of the imperialists in Morocco and Syria” in order to discredit their age-old political rivals – the ARF. However, once the story was taken up by the foreign press, no more distinction was made – were the alleged Armenian volunteer ARF members or just Armenians? After all, it was rare that the internal Armenian diversity was recognized by foreigners (although the French authorities often made a distinction between Orthodox and Catholic Armenians).

An investigation by the ARF and Ramkavar leaders in Paris to find out the author of an article in *Paykar*, signed by “X,” revealed that the content was first printed in *Yeni Adana*, according to which “Armenians in Syria had voluntarily formed an army against the Druze in exchange for large sums received from the French.” This story was then presented by the Syrian

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<sup>290</sup> “Hay Gaghtakanutyun Aryune.”

<sup>291</sup> M. J. “Inch Petk e Anen Gaghutum HOK-I Komitei Patgamavornere” [What Shall Do the Delegations of the HOK Committees Abroad], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, October 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>292</sup> “Lurer Saydayen” [New from Suweyda], *Nor Pyunik*, November 21, 1925, 1.

<sup>293</sup> Cholakian, *Suriahay Deproci Patmuytun* [The History of the Arm. Schools in Syria], (Yerevan, 2021), 2:361.

<sup>294</sup> Melkon Eplighetian, *Gaghtakayanen Khorherdaran* [From Refugee Camp to the Parliament] (Aleppo, 1998), 1:287-292, 317.

Independence Committee in Paris during the session of the League des Droits de l'Homme.<sup>295</sup> *Nor Pyunik* bitterly noted that such news was all too common in the Turkish press. However, what was painful was the fact that such news was being repeated by certain Syrian circles who presented it as true stories, and certain Armenian papers had fallen into the trap by publishing it in their papers.<sup>296</sup> On December 15, 1925, an appeal was also sent directly to the Syrian independence committee by *Pyunik* editors, which dismissed the news and called on them to avoid the trap of the enemies of the Armenians (Turks) and retract their groundless accusations.<sup>297</sup> This call, along with an open letter on behalf of *Nor Pyunik*, was published by *Ahd al-Jadid* in Beirut and *Ray ul-am* in Damascus, the latter had also added that “we are happy to see that Armenians do not wish to become tools in the hands of others in the struggle for Syria’s independence.”<sup>298</sup> Taha Al-Medawwar penned another article in *Ray-ul-am* announcing that Syrians are happy to hear that Armenians are neutral in this struggle; however, they (Armenians) must understand that Syrians are not pleased with their settlement since the Syrians themselves needed care and support given the dire economic crises that would continue. “Syria is like a fish stuck in the throat of many unable to swallow it”.... It was better for the Armenians to look for better conditions elsewhere.<sup>299</sup>

Thus, the story about the Armenian volunteers, although originating from Turkish sources, was repeated by the Syrian nationalists but was even more widely publicized by the Armenian communist sources. What the Soviets probably could not foresee, however, was the stir it caused among the Syrian nationalists and the wrong impression it gave the entire Armenian population on the international stage. In the Syrian and foreign press, any distinction between the ARF and communists was erased; instead, *Armenian armed units or volunteers* were referred to. It should be noted that an attempt was made to correct the situation as soon as possible. *Yerevan* declared from Paris that it was not the presence of the Armenian volunteers that created confusion about the loyalty of the Armenian refugees but the declarations of loyalty made by the ARF partisans to the French.<sup>300</sup> Similar statements were made later by the communist historians in their attempts to fight the misperceptions of the Western historians.

<sup>295</sup> “Gergerich Zerparyutyunner Parizi Mej Surio Hayeru Dem” [Inciting Accusations in Paris against the Armenians of Syria], *Nor Pyunik*, December 2, 1925, 1; “Urish Hayaker: Turk Provocation me” [Another Anti-Armenian Provocation in Yeni *Adana*], *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> “Provocationneru Dem” [Against the Provocations], *Nor Pyunik*, December 2, 1925, 1.

<sup>297</sup> “Batc Namak Parizi Arab Komitein Beiruti ‘Nor Pyunik’ Hayaterti Koghme,” [An Open Letter to the Arab Committee of Paris on Behalf of *Pyunik* Editors], *Nor Pyunik*, December 23, 1925, 1.

<sup>298</sup> “Ahd al-Jadid Nor Pyuniki Batc Namaki Artiv,” [Ahd al-Jadid about *Pyunik*’s Open Letter], *Nor Pyunik*, December 26, 1925, 4; “Ray ul-’Am Hayotc Masin,” [Ray ul-’Am about the Arm.], *Nor Pyunik*, Dec. 30, 1925, 4.

<sup>299</sup> Taha Al-Medawwar, “Armenians in Syria” *Ray ul-’Am*, December 27, 1925 cited in *Nor Pyunik* January 2, 1926, 3.

<sup>300</sup> Personal corr., “Damaskosi Abstambutyune” [The Rebellion of Damascus], *Yerevan*, December 2, 1925, 2.

Topuzyan, for example, recalled the testimony of Khosrov Tutunjian, the editor of *Pyunik*, who later turned against the ARF and was, therefore, trustworthy. According to it, all the Armenian circles, even the ARF, had been against the recruitment. The latter had even been successful in preventing former *Légion* soldiers from being recruited.<sup>301</sup> Topuzyan, of course, did not know about the secret agreement achieved between the ARF and Al-Atrash. Nevertheless, since communist historians, as late as the 1960s, still needed to expose the treacherous ARF, Topuzyan insisted that although the ARF did not have military men, in contrast to other Armenian circles, it was the only group in favor of such Armenian units.<sup>302</sup>

### **The consequences of the camp incident**

Navasardian, who was considered one of the ideological fathers of ARF, wrote shortly after the Revolt that ARF could not have any participation in the uprising as they considered it an interference in the affairs of another state.<sup>303</sup> This was the official ARF strategy in the colonies abroad, which they followed faithfully. However, the attack on the Armenians in Damascus changed the ARF policy in Syria and Lebanon. One of the reports sent to the Central Bureau asserted that “the recent massacres of the Armenians in Damascus oblige Armenians to end their neutral attitude. From now on, Armenians must search for reliable bases and political ways to protect themselves as they will continue to live in this country. It demands reflections and efforts from us.”<sup>304</sup>

Khosrov Tutunjian met with the Secretary of the High Commissioner Lepsiye shortly after the camp incident “to clarify the situation and find out the French mood toward the Armenians.” Two main issues were discussed: the recovery of the material losses of the Armenian refugees and measures to ensure their physical safety in Syria.<sup>305</sup> During this half-hour meeting, Lepsiye ensured the safety of the Armenians in Damascus but not in Aleppo and elsewhere. After the meeting, the ARF committee decided to organize Armenians’ defense by controlling the security of the camps. It also asked its Central Bureau to use all possible means to influence the French High Commissioner to support Armenians economically and politically.<sup>306</sup> The next report, sent just within nine days, reported that the self-defense in

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<sup>301</sup> Khosrov Tutunjian, *Byuroakan Senankutyune*, 111, cited in Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnaktutyune*, 8

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>303</sup> Vahan Navasardian, *Dashnakshutyan Kaghakan Ughin* [The Political Road of ARF] (Cairo, 1925), 82.

<sup>304</sup> ARF archives, “Teghekagir Damaskosi, 22.

<sup>305</sup> ARF archives, Fond E, file 973, N: 52, From the Lernavayr Committee to the ARF Central Bureau, 4-5.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

Damascus was already ensured.<sup>307</sup> Lepsiye then ordered the preparation of a list of all the Armenians requiring damage compensation. The lists were quickly drawn up and included 236 families to be compensated with 10,728 pieces of Ottoman gold.

The ARF did not wait for the French compensation; instead, it urged the Central Bureau to send financial support as “the current situation in Syria is extraordinary, we cannot trust Sarrail, who is unable to contain the revolt. Al-Atrash is friendly toward the Armenians, but there are many active Turkish agents.”<sup>308</sup> As in the Cilicia crisis, the promised French financial support would never arrive.

On the other hand, the intensified ARF contacts with the French authorities meant that the ARF unintentionally played into the hands of the communists, who, from the very start, had accused the latter of being “French agents.” As expected, the ARF-French collaboration polarized the Armenian refugee community even further. It was now divided into two opposing camps, one headed by the communists and the non-ARF forces who advocated for closer cooperation with the Syrians; and the other by ARF members who, by contrast, sought closer cooperation with the French authorities. It may be that the disappointment after the Armenian camp incident was so great that ARF members were convinced that the Syrians were not reliable partners. Hence, they chose to cooperate with the French so that they could ensure the safety of the community better. At the same time, the first elections in Aleppo were scheduled to take place, as discussed in Part II. It could also be that the ARF counted on having a greater political role by choosing the French side.

On the contrary, the incident helped to push many non-ARF members toward the communist camp as a way of rejecting the accusations of being “French agents.” These people refused to be identified with the French, as they blamed the French for all their misfortune. The Communist Party, therefore, seemed to offer a common platform for them to cooperate with their Arab counterparts.

The leadership struggle between the two opposing Armenian camps became increasingly bitter, especially in the context of the elections for the Armenian Provincial Assembly (internal representative elections) organized by Sahak II in Beirut on July 18, 1926, in which the Armenian refugees were allowed to participate for the first time.<sup>309</sup> The occasion was another source of violent clashes for power in the refugee community that occurred at least

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<sup>307</sup> ARF archives, Fond E, file 973, N: 50, From Lernavayr to the ARF Central Bureau, November 11, 1925.

<sup>308</sup> ARF archives, Fond E, file 973, N: 58, N: 94, November 15, 1925, 1.

<sup>309</sup> Own correspondent, “Damaskosi Katcutyune,” [The Situation in Damascus], *Nor Pyunik*, June 29, 1926, 1.

twice, on July 18 and September 28, 1926. This, too, would be presented in the communist records to show that the ARF took Beirut's national affairs into their hands by force.<sup>310</sup>

Although these elections depended mainly on the personalities and not on the political party programs, on July 17, 1926, *Nor Pyunik* made the official ARF program public. The first line read, "The necessity to establish closer relations with the mandatory and the local government to fight against the imaginary accusations against the Armenians." Other points included using local laws to protect civil rights, achieving Armenian national autonomy, fighting against internal divisions in the community, improving education, caring for the orphans, preventing the emigration of Armenian refugees from Syria,<sup>311</sup> caring for all the camp issues (from administration to sanitary and moral conditions), and undertake a census.<sup>312</sup> The next day, the results of the elections, in which about 1,500 persons had participated, were in favor of the ARF.

Notably, *Nor Pyunik's* article on the ARF program is widely cited in communist writings to show that the "ARF were the servants of the French imperialism."<sup>313</sup> Tellingly, only the first half-sentence of the first line is presented "To establish a firm link between the French and the Armenians," while the second part, which said "as well as with the local government" is nowhere to be seen.

The message of the ARF to the refugees was identical to the one sent by the communists. Both parties encouraged the cultivation of Armenian-Arab friendship, which was the best guarantee for the 120,000 Armenians. Outside Armenia, Armenians were permanent or temporary guests with no political aspirations. Therefore, the animosity between the Armenians and the Syrians was purely imaginary, for the Armenians had given no single reason for such an attitude.<sup>314</sup> Interestingly, for the ARF, the misunderstanding was due to the Kemalist factor, not the communists.

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<sup>310</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnaktsutyune*, 49.

<sup>311</sup> After the USSR, Syria hosted the largest Armenian population, all Armenian political circles agreed to prevent their emigration elsewhere in order to keep the political importance of the Ottoman Armenians. They also still cherished hopes for Cilicia. Emigration of the refugees to Western countries was regarded less favorably since it was believed their assimilation would be completed quicker. "Suriahay Artagaghti Artiv" [Immigration of the Armenians out of Syria], *Droshak*, December 1928, 1-2.

<sup>312</sup> "Gavarakani Entrutyunnere" [The Election of the Provincial Body], *Nor Pyunik*, July 20, 1926, 1.

<sup>313</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnaktsutyune*, 49.

<sup>314</sup> "Hay- Arabakan Barekamutyune" [Armenian and Arab Friendship], *Nor Pyunik*, October 31, 1925, 1.

## February 1926 disturbances and the Armenians

Other than the camp incident, the rumors about the Armenian armed volunteers and their atrocities were renewed in February 1926, this time with more vigor. The new bout of rumor-mongering happened in parallel to the large-scale recruitment of local militias in Syria by the French authorities at the beginning of February. There were, therefore, two distinct episodes that directly involved the Armenian refugees during the entire Revolt. The first was undoubtedly the camp incident; the second was the February 1926 disturbance in Damascus. The chronology is important in the discussion of the Armenian militias. It seems that talks about the Armenian armed forces went into circulation, especially after this open recruitment, which happened in February, at least four months after the Armenian camp incident. As we shall see, the recruitment was largely an outcome of the camp incident and not its cause, as presented by Western sources.

At the end of 1925, before this open recruitment, all the Armenian policemen that operated in Antioch and Alexandretta were removed and brought to Aleppo and Damascus as a result of Turkish complaints.<sup>315</sup> This redeployment had already created the impression that there were too many Armenian policemen in Damascus when the new recruitment started.

The formation of the police units for maintaining internal order was stipulated by the second article of the mandate treaty. The article stated clearly, that “these local forces may only be recruited from the inhabitants of the said territory.”<sup>316</sup> These new forces were recruited as a response to the similar ongoing cheté (irregular forces) recruitment process in the Syrian-Turkish borderlands, and in Kilis, in particular.<sup>317</sup> Once again a handsome salary of 7–10 Ottoman gold was offered, which had attracted a large number of Circassians, Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians, especially the unemployed youth. *Arev* clearly stated that the main reason for all these youth to enlist had been their desire to fight against starvation. This time, all the efforts of the Armenian national bodies to keep the Armenian youth away had been in vain. The latter had demanded bread instead. This recruitment, however, did not go unnoticed by the Damascenes, particularly the nationalists. According to *Arev*, the Armenian leaders were publicly warned more than once. The Armenian refugees were now between two dangers, one worse than another, starvation or gaining the hatred of the locals – their final destruction.<sup>318</sup> The

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<sup>315</sup> Vahanik, “Depker Antioki Sherjanin Mej” [Incidents in Antioch], *Nor Pyunik*, February 24, 1926, 2.

<sup>316</sup> The mandate treaty text see in NARA, American consular service, confidential files, Beirut, Lebanon, volume 465 (1-4), Convention between the USA and French regarding the mandate for Syria and Lebanon, 174.

<sup>317</sup> Own correspondent, “Depkere Surio mej: Milisi Ardzanagrutuyune ev Hayere” [Events in Syria: The Reportings of Millis and the Armenians], *Arev*, February 18, 1926, 1-2.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

solution suggested by *Arev* was to convince the French not to recruit Armenians because “If France has interests in Syria and has resolved to remain there, she does not lack any means for it, neither personal nor money, and she does not need to exploit the poor Armenians.”<sup>319</sup>

After this recruitment, rumors about the Armenian volunteers and their committed atrocities were revived. This time, it was not only the Syrian nationalists who complained about the Armenians; the rebels also sent two letters – one to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Damascus and another to Sheikh Badr Al-Din Al-Hasani, protesting “against the barbarous acts of the Armenian and Circassian irregulars in the Meidan Quarter.” They referred to the active fights that had taken place in Meidan on the night of February 17, during which it was said many inhabitants were terrorized and their houses looted. The Patriarch and the Sheikh were asked to use their authority and intervene before the French authorities to withdraw the Christian irregulars and punish those guilty of excesses to avoid a Christian massacre.<sup>320</sup> The letters mentioned how the rebels had understood from the very start the desire of the French to give a sectarian character to the conflict. It had become clear to them when Carbillet had shouted in the streets of Damascus at the time of the first rebel entrance on August 24, 1925, “Where are you, oh Christians of Damascus? Today, your task begins!” Therefore, the rebels had been careful and refrained from attacking any Christians, even those who had plotted against them. One such personality was Joseph Isa – the Greek Orthodox editor of *Alef-Ba’*, who ran a pen-war against the rebels.<sup>321</sup> If the irregulars were not curbed, the authors, who signed as the Meidan League, Toufic Mahayni, and Abdulkader Souccar, threatened to change their policy by making the Christian neighborhoods the main targets.

According to the American confidential reports, there were 2,000 Circassians and 80 Armenians in the newly recruited militias.<sup>322</sup> Tellingly, in the response of General Andrea, the commander of the French forces in Damascus, to the Sheikh, a reference was made to the Circassian forces, but there was no word about the Armenians.<sup>323</sup>

We learn from *New Pyunik* that these ultimatums, including the two letters, were made public in the pages of *Al-Ahrar*, with an open threat that “All the Armenians were to be

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<sup>319</sup> Editorial, “Yerku Kraki Mej” [Between Two Fires], *Arev*, February 18, 1926, 1.

<sup>320</sup> The letters – both original and translation can be consulted in NARA, 465 (3-4), American Consulate, from Keeley to the Secretary of State, Confidential “Correspondence dealing with the atrocities committed by Armenian and Circassian irregulars in the Meidan Quarter of Damascus during February 1926,” Damascus March 25, 1926. For a detailed discussion of the letters, see Joel Veldkamp, “Sectarian Violence in the 1925 Syrian Uprising.”

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, also “Surio Apstambneru Spamalike Jardelu Damaskosi Hayern u Kristonianere, Yerku Namakner,” [The Threatening of the Rebels to Massacre all the Arm. of Damascus and Christians], *Nor Pyunik*, Febr. 24, 1926, 1.

<sup>322</sup> NARA, Vol. 466 (4-4), American Consulate, from Keeley to the Secretary of State, Confidential, “Notes on the Political Situation in Damascus Consular District Covering the Period from February 15 to 20, 1926, Inclusive,” Damascus, February 22, 1926.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.



massacred if they continued to be used by the French.”<sup>324</sup> The same article also revealed that the French had, in fact, dismissed all the newly recruited Armenians, including the policemen, after these debates. The paper considered these measures were insufficient since the general misconception about the Armenians was widespread among the population and the nationalist leaders. The name of Dr. Shahbandar was given. There was an urgent need for the Armenians, and Sahak II, in particular, to meet immediately with the local religious heads to settle the misunderstanding, while “ARF shall perform its duty by not allowing the Armenians to become scapegoats once again.”<sup>325</sup> *New Pyunik* published both letters along with the friendly note sent by the editors of *Al-Ahrar*. The latter had addressed an inquiry to the Syrian government about the Armenian volunteers and received the response that there were no Armenian volunteers and there was no connection between the Armenians and the other Christians of Damascus.<sup>326</sup> The “friendly note” of *Al-Ahrar* is noteworthy. In fact, *Al-Ahrar* was not a random paper; as we shall discover later, it had close connections with the Arab communists and later would be used as a platform for exposing the ARF. In February 1926, it arguably had a different mission – to dissipate the wrong and dangerous anti-Armenian sentiments. Was it instructed by Moscow or Yerevan since their earlier declarations about “600 Armenian volunteers” had become one of the main reasons to blame the Armenian volunteers and their alleged atrocities? It is not clear. What is clear was the fact that *Al-Ahrar*’s friendly message to *New Pyunik* was an unusual occurrence.

The Syrian leaders did not wait for the French or any other intermediaries to find the guilty parties in the February disturbances. Instead, they took matters into their own hands. On February 18, the day after the incident, several Syrian notables met and immediately and successfully disarmed 30 Armenians serving in the militias. The volunteers’ houses were then searched to recover any looted goods. It was said that once the word of this operation spread through the city, the crowd started to attack any Armenians in the streets of Damascus, beating and killing them at random. The police also did the same. The situation changed quickly. At about 2.00 pm, once the search of the houses was completed and nothing was found, the disarmed volunteers were ordered to return to their former places in the militias and were allowed to shoot anyone who would attack them.<sup>327</sup> However, the situation did not improve. In

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<sup>324</sup> Editorial, “Kavutyany Nokhaze” [Armenians Again as Scapegoat], *Nor Pyunik*, February 24, 1926, 1.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> [The Threatening of the Syrian Rebels to Massacre all the Armenians; “Ahrare Hayeru Masin,” [*Ahrar* about the Armenians), *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>327</sup> Own reporter, “Hakahay Gergrutyunner Damaskosi Mej” [Anti-Armenian Campaign in Damascus], *Nor Pyunik*, February 24, 1926, 1.

the words of *Nor Pyunik*, “the situation is fatal for the Armenians, and troublesome not only for the present but also for the future.” Now, even the Christian Syrians were against the refugees since they believed that they had become a target for the rebels because of the Armenians. Thus, the entire blame for the current crises and the chaos was put on the Armenians.<sup>328</sup>

*Arev* reprinted an editorial from *The Times* titled “Accusations against the Armenians neither justified nor correct.” In a long article giving an account of the latest developments, it suggested that the militias were composed of irregulars, mostly Israelites and Muslim Circassians, and a few Christian Armenians and that any targeted campaign against the Armenians was unjustified.<sup>329</sup>

On March 5, Sahak II, who claimed to represent all the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon, met with the French High Commissioner with the aim of preventing recruitment among the Armenians. He had reportedly announced that “the starvation of a few was preferable to endangering the lives of the whole Armenian population.”<sup>330</sup>

Once it was clear to the Damascene notables that the Armenian militias were not guilty, and that no booty had been found in their houses, many notables took the initiative to dismiss the wrong impressions and combat the anti-Armenian propaganda. Important sermons were given in Damascus by Abdal Kader Khatib as well as Sheikh Badreddin, who called for peace. At the same time, French soldiers were praised for their efforts to find and punish those guilty for the looting in Meidan.<sup>331</sup> *Al-Ahrar*, in its turn, carried two successive articles that were extremely positive about the Armenians.<sup>332</sup> The one published under the telling headline “Damascene Christians between the Armenians and the rebels” was a detailed analysis of the three threatening letters published earlier. It stated that all three letters threatened to attack the Christians if Armenian volunteers continued to fight and the French continued to present the current struggle as a purely religious affair. However, what the threats overlooked was the fact that the few Armenian volunteers fought side-by-side with the numerous Muslim Circassians. If the logic of the rebels were to be respected, then the Muslim Circassians would make revenge attacks on the Muslim neighborhoods. Armenians and Circassians cooperated with the

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Cited in “Surio Katsutyune: Meghadranke Hayeru Dem Voch Ardar e, Ev Voch Parkesht” [The Situation in Syria: The Accusations Against the Armenians are Neither Justified, nor Appropriate], *Arev*, April 1, 1926, 1.

<sup>330</sup> “Vehapar Katoghikose Bardzr Komiseri Mot,” [At Last, Sahak II Met the High Commissioner], *Arev*, March 13, 1926, 2.

<sup>331</sup> “Suiiri Mej” [In Syria], *Nor Pyunik*, February 24, 1926, 3.

<sup>332</sup> “*Al-Ahrar* e Hayeru Masin,” [*Al-Ahrar* About the Armenians], *Nor Pyunik*, February 24, 1926, 3; Jubran Tweini, “Damaskosi Kristonyannere Hayeru ev Embostneru Mijev,” [Damascene Christians between the Armenians the Rebels], *Nor Pyunik*, February 27, 1926, 1.

government without religious distinction, and it was wrong to make others responsible for their actions.

The paper condemned the rebels for threatening to attack the Christian neighborhoods since the issue had nothing to do with the religion and the Armenian volunteers had nothing to do with the local Christians. The paper wondered if there were no Muslims who were against the rebels. Should they, too, be punished? Muslims forgot that there were Christian nationalists exiled along with their Muslim counterparts, such as Fares Al-Khury, who was in Arwad Island, and Taufik Al-Shamiye, who was in Hasakke. Finally, if the rebels attacked the Christians, they would demonstrate the religious character of the uprising and, by doing so, would fall into the trap of the French. Furthermore, the paper condemned the groundless criminal accusations against the militias.<sup>333</sup>

Other actions, such as newspaper censorship as well as harsh punishments for those who continued to kill innocent Armenians in the streets of Damascus, were implemented to restore order.<sup>334</sup> Notwithstanding these efforts, Armenians continued to leave Damascus in larger numbers and at greater speed, mostly to Beirut. Nowhere seemed to be safe for them. A boycott against the Armenians was underway not only in Damascus but also in Beirut, Tripoli, Homs, and even Aleppo.<sup>335</sup> The boycott had turned violent, especially in Tripoli, where many anti-Armenian *khutbas* (sermons) were made on Friday, March 6. In one of them, the sheikh had even announced that Armenians had built underground corridors to explode their mosques. After this, the Muslims started to curse the Armenian shopkeepers publicly. All the Armenians shut their shops, which remained closed for several days. When, finally, on March 12, after the intervention of the governor, Abdul Hamid Bey, certain Armenians dared to reopen their shops, a new placard denouncing “the crimes and misbehavior of the Armenians in Damascus” was put up again.<sup>336</sup>

More oil was poured on the fire by the Syrian-Palestinian committee. This body had filed a new report to the LoN, which met in Rome to discuss the Syrian crisis. This time, in addition to the earlier accusations put forward right after the camp incident (that Armenian

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> For example, *Ahd al-Jadid* and *L'Orient* were censored, while *Ray ul-'Am* closed and the editor was imprisoned, see in “Dadarum n *Ahd al-Jadid* ev *L'Orient*,” *Nor Pyunik*, February 27, 1926, 3; For example, when a certain Sarkissian was killed brutally, his killer was condemned to death too, others were sentenced to 10 years in prison, yet others were obliged to pay compensation to the families of the victim, see in “Damaskosi Hayere,” [The Armenians of Damascus], *Nor Pyunik*, February 27, 1926, 3.

<sup>335</sup> “Surihay Katsutyune” [The Situation in Syria], *Arev*, March 1, 1926, 1; “Hayeru Vetrangavor Katcutuyne Homs-um,” [The Dangerous Situation of the Armenians in Homs], *Nor Pyunik*, March 6, 1926, 3; “Halepi Mej Poykote Hayeru Dem,” [A Boycott Ongoing in Aleppo against the Armenians], *Nor Pyunik*, April 15, 1926, 3.

<sup>336</sup> “Hakahay Gergrutunner Tripoli mej,” [Anti-Armenian Propaganda in Tripoli], *Nor Pyunik*, March 13, 1926, 1.

irregulars had cut the fingers of the Arab women and Shahbandar's claim that 10,000 Armenian volunteers fought against the rebels), new ones were added. For example, Armenian volunteers accused of killing 600 Damascenes, looting 60 shops, and burning 1,500 houses in the Meidan area. Only thanks to the local notables intervening with the French forces had it been possible to punish the guilty Armenians by dismissing 20 of them.<sup>337</sup> These claims were made in a telegram sent from Cairo and printed in *Journal de Genève* on February 25.

In our opinion, the disturbances of February and the large-scale anti-Armenian propaganda have served as the basis for Western observers and scholars to claim that the camp incident of October (1925) was the result of the activities of the Armenian armed volunteers (1926). However, the camp incident was not a *result* of Armenian volunteer activity; instead, it was the reason why more Armenians joined such units and was, therefore, a *cause* of Armenian volunteer activity. Even then, analysis of the events of February 1926 proved that the involvement of the Armenian volunteers, their numbers, and the scale of the alleged atrocities remained disputed. Another interesting phenomenon was the supportive pro-Armenian stance of *Al-Ahrar*, a newspaper famous for its communist ties. While, in the fall of 1925, it was the communist circles who had denounced ARF-led Armenian volunteers to discredit ARF, in the spring of 1926, pro-communist papers were making pro-Armenian propaganda. Perhaps, having realized that their allegations against the ARF had turned against all Armenian refugees, they were now attempting to correct the mistake, or perhaps there were other reasons; the situation remains unclear. In our opinion, apart from the inter-Armenian power struggle between the ARF and Soviet authorities, there were other powerful actors spreading rumors of the "Armenian armed volunteers or bands." Turkey was one of these actors, and we should not forget the Pan-Islamic connections between Turkey and the Syrian Palestinian Committee, which we would like to discuss briefly.

### **Chapter III: The Turkish factor, the ICRC's mission and the unexpected birth of the large-scale refugee settlement plan in Syria**

This chapter sheds light on the role of Turkey and its connections with the Syrian-Palestinian Committee, which had compiled accusations against the alleged Armenian armed groups. It demonstrates that stories about "Armenian armed groups" in Syria were regularly published in

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<sup>337</sup> "Nor Ambastanutyune Me Surio Hayeru dem: Suriakan Komitei Heragire Hogatarutyuan Handznajoghovin Hrom, 600 Islamnerun Jardi Masin Damaskosi Mej, Hayeru Dzerkov" [New Accusations Against the Armenians in Syria: Syrian Committee sent a Telegramme to Rome about the Alledged Massacres of 600 Muslims in Damascus by the Armenians], *Nor Pyunik*, March 20, 1926, 1; "Dardzyal Hayaker Zerpartutyunner" [Anti-Armenian Accusations Once Again], *Nor Pyunik*, March 20, 1926, 1.

the Turkish press well before the Revolt. Finally, it shows the backstage efforts in relation to Turkey's main preoccupation – the Mosul affair, and how a Turkish sponsored fact-finding mission to Syria was to become the backbone of the large-scale refugee settlement in Syria.

### **The Syrian-Palestinian Committee and the accusations against the Armenians**

All the accusations against the Armenians were compiled by the Syrian-Palestinian Committee and submitted to the LoN special session on Syria held in Rome in February–March 1926. The signees of this important petition were Michel Lutfallah, Emir Shakib Arslan, Dr. Shahbandar, and Jamil Ulchiev – all of them sworn anti-Mandate partisans. Shakib Arslan, in particular, was the author of numerous anti-mandate petitions submitted to the LoN.<sup>338</sup> He was also famous for his ties with the Turkish authorities and was one of the opponents of the pan-Islamic struggle and Syria's unity with Turkey.<sup>339</sup> Shakib Arslan was not the only pro-Turkish member of the committee. Another was Ihsan al-Jabiri,<sup>340</sup> a member of an influential Alepine family, who was exiled in Geneva and attended the special session.

Rumors about the “Armenian armed bands” on the Syrian-Turkish border predated the Revolt. Such articles were regularly printed in the Turkish newspapers, especially *Jumhuriyet*. It must be said that all the attention given to the Syrian-Turkish border in the Turkish, British, and French press during this period was largely informed by the conflicting claims over Mosul. *Le Temps*, in an article on Syria, mentioned the widely discussed theme in the Turkish press about the “*French policies of recruiting Circassian and especially Armenian armed units deployed on the Syrian-Turkish border.*” *Le Temps* suggested that such news should be denied officially and immediately if it did not correspond to reality since it was done to incite the Turks and the Muslims against the Armenians. In case the reported news was partially true, it ought to be corrected.<sup>341</sup> French actions in this regard were immediate. Armenians were no longer allowed to serve as gendarmes, especially in the border regions, including Alexandretta. This news was not appreciated in Armenian circles. *Pyunik* published an article under the telling title “We Demand Justice,” stating that Armenian gendarmes were blamed for the continuous fights and incidents on the Syrian-Turkish border, which did not correspond to the reality. For four

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<sup>338</sup> MAE, vol. 50/197, #279, 289, 290, 317, 319, 331, 371, 372, 374, 376, 378, 56. Shakib Arslan was a former Ottoman official, the governor of Chouf (Lebanon).

<sup>339</sup> More on Shakib Arslan and his activities, see W. L. Cleveland, *Islam against the West, Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

<sup>340</sup> Ihsan Al-Jabiri had studied law in Istanbul before WWI and embraced openly Ottomanism. See in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 431.

<sup>341</sup> Cited in “Kaytser Arevelki Mej: Anglio Arevelyan Kaghakanuyt'une” [Sparks in the Orient: The Eastern Politics of Great Britain], *Suriakan Mamul*, June 6, 1924, 1-2.

years, the chief gendarme in Alexandretta had been Hrant Maloyan – an Armenian, and not a single fight was recorded. Moreover, Armenians of Alexandretta were mostly ethnic Armenians and not incoming refugees; why should these 25,000 Armenians be deprived of their rights?<sup>342</sup>

In 1924, such claims resulted in the French policy of relocating all the Armenian policemen and gendarmes from the border regions, including Alexandretta and the Syrian Jazira, to Aleppo and Damascus. This, in turn, had given the Syrian nationalists the impression that there were too many Armenian policemen, which was regarded with suspicion. The Turkish propaganda had been effective in Paris, too. Here, many articles criticized the French mandate in Syria and started to draw parallels between the Armenian and the Jewish immigrations, considering the Armenian influx dangerous for the Syrians. “It is as disastrous for Syria as the Jewish immigration is for Palestine” – one such accusation claimed.<sup>343</sup> The response of the High Commissioner to this was as interesting as the accusation itself. It stated that the arrival of the Armenians in Syria could not possibly be compared to that of the Jews in Palestine, that the number of Armenians did not exceed 100,000, out of which 85,000 had arrived after the Cilician evacuation (thus because of the French withdrawal from there), while 12,000 had arrived since the beginning of 1924, as a result of the hidden deportations of the Christians. Turkish claims that Armenians are regrouped in Aleppo *and as many as 31,647 men are armed to fight against Turkey did not correspond to the reality. Not only no Armenian men were armed, but they were also dispersed in all the major cities of Syria.* Jewish immigration, on the other hand, was considered dangerous and uncontrollable.<sup>344</sup>

What was Turkey’s role in the accusations put forward by the Syrian-Palestinian Committee regarding the Armenian volunteers and their alleged atrocities? Most Armenian sources and certain British press outlets claimed that Turkey was behind the propaganda. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Turkey had incited the events in Syria as it suspected that such events would make the French socialists, who had recently come into power, demand the withdrawal of the French mandate from Syria.<sup>345</sup> It is difficult to know the full extent of the Turkish involvement; however, it is clear that many socialist circles, did, indeed, demand the

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<sup>342</sup> Seto, “Ardarityun ke Pahanjenk” [We Demand Justice] *Pyunik*, April 18, 1925, 1.

<sup>343</sup> MAE, vol. 50/209, #168, Weygand, “Note, relevé des attaques, diigées contre l’ouvre et la présence de la France en Syrie par la propagande anti-français,” 30 octobre 1924.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>345</sup> MAE, vol 50/197, #168, 6, For details about the provisions, see Du Haut-Commissaire de la République Française en Syrie à Le ministre des affaires étrangères, ‘Bulletin de quinzaine N : 5 du Cabinet du Haut-Commissaire, Beyrouth, 2 mars 1926 ; MAE, vol 50/197, #94, Robert Poulaine, *Temps*, 16 février 1926.

withdrawal of the French forces from Syria, especially after the French losses in the Riff were announced in October 1925.<sup>346</sup>

The French embassy in Ankara, in its turn, sent a secret note to Paris reporting the reception of a secret telegram from the Syrian-Palestinian Committee asking for Turkey's support for the rebels. The telegram noted that while there was much noise in the international press about the events in Syria, the Turkish press had largely refrained from printing anti-French articles despite the issues with the Syrian-Turkish border. The telegram revealed the intentions of the Syrian-Palestinian Committee to ask for a British mandate for Syria and that official circles in Ankara favored it.<sup>347</sup> Furthermore, the Turkish danger was not over, as the latter did not hide its aspiration to annex Alexandretta, Antioch, and Aleppo and full control over the railroad. Moreover, the Mosul dispute was not settled yet; therefore, Turkey followed the developments in Syria closely.<sup>348</sup> It was wrong that no attention was given to the Syrian events in the Turkish press. The Adana press, for example, was openly pro-rebel, while another intelligence report had revealed that Turkey waited for the outcome of the Mosul affair before pledging its support publicly to the rebels.<sup>349</sup>

Although the archives provide no links between the accusations of the Syrian-Palestinian Committee and Turkish influence, we are nevertheless inclined to assume that the Turkish connection had played a significant role. Previously the Turkish press continually wrote about the "Armenian armed bands" in Syria, claiming exaggerated figures. Moreover, they had successfully influenced certain political circles in Paris. The latter, comprising socialist and anti-mandate forces, had started campaigning openly against the mandate. It was clear that Turkey deployed propaganda and backstage diplomacy to influence the events in Syria to its advantage.

Turkey's main concern during this period was the Mosul affair. Mosul had been a disputed territory between Iraq and Turkey well into the mid-1920s. In this dispute, both Iraq, represented legally by the British mandatory power, and Turkey laid claims over the Ottoman vilayet of Mosul. The previous research on this episode has established that, in the early 1920s, Turkey feared that Great Britain would create a "national home" for the Kurds and strived to

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<sup>346</sup> 2176 dead, including 4 officers and 500 French soldiers, and 5306 wounded, including 160 officers and 1330 French soldiers. The damage was considered 950 million francs, see in "Fransiayi Korustnere" [French Loses], *Nor Pyunik*, October 24, 1925, 3. More on the Riff, see Georgio Poti, "Imperial Violence."

<sup>347</sup> MAE, 50/195, #278, Confidentiel, de l'ambassadeur en Turquie, Monsieur Sarraut à le ministre des affaires étrangères, 5 novembre 1925.

<sup>348</sup> MAE, vol. 50/195, E 412/1 de F.B. à monsieur le ministre des affaires étrangères, 31 octobre 1925, 6.

<sup>349</sup> *Journal Yeni Adana*, Septembre 14, 1925, cited in MAE/P, Turquie, 574, #76-77 ; P. Alype (très confidentiel), 24 août 1926, SHAT 4 H, 134, d.3, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 432.

prevent it.<sup>350</sup> In May 1924, the LoN was officially asked to take responsibility for the determination of the Turco-Iraqi frontier.<sup>351</sup> The LoN's Council then formed an International Enquiry Commission.<sup>352</sup> In December 1925, the LoN decided in favor of Iraq.<sup>353</sup>

The Turkish authorities had publicly made clear their dissatisfaction with the French for not assisting them over Mosul. According to the *Baghdad Times*, the French had been saved from the Turkish intrigues in Alexandretta by the local population's dislike for military service. Under the French mandate, they were exempted from such service and seemed happy with the current order. The Turkish silence after the conclusion of the LoN's decision regarding Mosul was, nevertheless, unusual. Some believed that it was either due to the unstable political situation in Turkey, which held them back, or another diplomatic bluff in which "they (Turks) are so expert," was in preparation.<sup>354</sup>

The French authorities acknowledged that the anarchy in Syria, especially in northern Syria, and the unprotected borders did not go unnoticed by Turkey. Although Turkey officially remained true to its previous politics, irregular bands were encouraged to terrorize the border villages. Moreover, during the elections in Aleppo (January 1926), Turkish propaganda for the re-attachment of Aleppo to Cilicia (i.e., to Turkey) was spread more openly.<sup>355</sup>

In any case, the Turkish danger was considered serious enough for Jouvenel, the newly appointed French High Commissioner, to leave for Ankara shortly after his arrival in Syria to conclude a friendship treaty in February 1926. The extensive list prepared by Sarraïl, the departing High Commissioner, on all the problems created by the Turks in Syria was illuminating. It contained 26 separate points; for example, these included: agitation in the Syrian Jazira, the Bahandur affair, an attack on the pro-French Kurdish tribes (July 1925), open propaganda for the reattachment of certain Syrian regions to Turkey, encouraging irregular bands and attacks, interdiction of the exportation of fruits and vegetables to Syria, refusal of

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<sup>350</sup> Hamit Bozarslan, *La question kurde: états et minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), 296; Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1890-1925* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1989), 125; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1997), 146; For an insightful account how the borderlanders influenced the border delimitation during the works and the visits of this Enquiry Commission, see Jordi Tejel "Making Borders from Below: The Emergence of the Turkish-Iraqi Frontier, 1918-1925," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 54:5 (2018), 811-826.

<sup>351</sup> Aryo Makko, "Arbitrator in a World of Wars: The League of Nations and the Mosul Dispute, 1924-1925," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. 21:4 (2010), 631-649, 633.

<sup>352</sup> Sweden used this opportunity to establish its own image as a neutral intermediary in international politics. The other two members of the Commission were Pal Teleki, a well-known Hungarian geography professor and former Hungarian prime minister, and Albert Paulis, a Belgian captain who had served in Congo. *Ibid*, 637.

<sup>353</sup> By June 1926, the dispute was settled when Ankara signed an agreement with Britain leaving Mosul to Iraq in return for 25-year oil concessions, Makko, "Arbitrator in a World," fn 92, 645.

<sup>354</sup> MAE vol. 50/196, # 258, "The Syrian Situation," *Baghdad Times*, January 25, 1926.

<sup>355</sup> MAE, vol. 50/197, #94, Robert Poulaine, *Temps*, 16 février 1926.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid*.



passports to the Christians, and intensified pro-Turkish propaganda in Alexandretta.<sup>356</sup> The first treaty would be concluded between France and Turkey on February 18, 1926, which would culminate in the conclusion of a friendship treaty in May 1926. The treaty's conclusion was not, however, the only way Turkey wished to be compensated for oil-rich Mosul. The French authorities were correct in their suspicions about a Turkish intrigue. An undercover initiative was in preparation in Geneva, again in close cooperation with the Syrian-Palestinian Committee.

### **The Turkish connections and the ICRC's fact-finding mission to Syria**

When, in the autumn of 1925, Shakib Arslan and al-Jabiri, met Raymond Schlemmer, the ICRC representative, they urged that a fact-finding mission should be sent to Syria. Tellingly they also pledged to cover the expenses of such a mission, after Schlemmer had told them that ICRC was willing but lacked financial means.<sup>357</sup> These funds, unsurprisingly, came from Turkish sources, including the Turkish Red Crescent. The vice-president of the latter was Dr. Akil Moukhtar in Istanbul, who was contacted immediately by Schlemmer asking him to find the necessary financial means for the mission to Syria insisted upon by Ihsan Al-Jabiri.<sup>358</sup> After the funds had been arranged at extraordinary speed, Schlemmer's visit to Syria was arranged. Tellingly, once there, Schlemmer visited the Turkish consulate in Beirut first, where he presented the support letter signed by Dr. Moukhtar.<sup>359</sup>

Schlemmer joined de Jouvenel on a boat heading to Syria. He had successfully obtained enough funds for his fact-finding mission but still needed official permission. Since time was short and ICRC deliberately wished to avoid the formal procedures for obtaining a permit, Schlemmer had to find another way to get approval for his "humanitarian" mission, notably, a boat journey with the High Commissioner.<sup>360</sup> Due to the French desire to improve her image on the international stage, permission was given. Upon their arrival in Beirut on December 2, 1925, the two men immediately embarked on fulfilling their respective missions, as we shall see.

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<sup>356</sup> MAE vol 50/196, #24, #31, Le général Sarrail à le monsieur l'ambassadeur de France à Istanbul, "Affaires litigieuse entre la Turquie et le Syrie," Beyrouth, 3 Septembre 1925, Répertoire des affaires rappelons.

<sup>357</sup> Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 436-438.

<sup>358</sup> Archives of the Committee of the International Red Cross (hereafter ACICR), MIS/vol. 76, 2, R. Schlemmer au Dr. A. Moukhtar (Istanbul), 26 novembre 1925.

<sup>359</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-10, R. Schlemmer au CICR ; 3-6 décembre 1925.

<sup>360</sup> Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 431.

Why was the ICRC so concerned about the Syrian events and so anxious to send an urgent fact-finding mission there? It appears that ICRC had closely followed the uprising (the Riff uprising) in Morocco since 1924 and tried in vain to send a humanitarian mission there. Throughout 1925, Schlemmer had been negotiating with the French and Spanish governments to make such a mission happen. Their categorical refusal had closed the matter in September 1925,<sup>361</sup> but one month later, the request and funding offer for Syria were received. Given the new opportunity, the ICRC was compelled to respond quickly. As explained by Schlemmer to his friend Golden, the head of the British Save the Children Fund: “France would surely turn down the mission politely as she did for Morocco, justifying it by saying that, more than the charity and the pacification, other consequences of the mission would be additional political agitation.”<sup>362</sup>

This explains the ICRC’s rush to find the necessary funds from *any source* and leave for Syria without official permission.<sup>363</sup> More than the humanitarian concerns behind such a mission, the driving factor was the rivalry between the LoN and the ICRC and the authority crisis of the latter. Although it had been vaguely decided that the LoN would intervene during peacetime and ICRC during wartime, the 12<sup>th</sup> congress of the ICRC, held in October 1925, had confirmed that the new international tendency was to favor the LoN.<sup>364</sup> The negotiations to apportion the zones of influence between the two were still ongoing, and the ICRC was trying to ally with its national committees to prevent them from joining the LoN. One such important national committee was the Turkish Red Crescent.

Thus, the mission to Syria was important for the ICRC and Turkey. If for the ICRC, it was a self-affirming mission, for Turkey, it was an attempt to secure a favorable position on the Mosul affair. The timing of the mission was key. The autumn of 1925 had been quite eventful. On October 30, the International Enquiry Commission arrived in the region. By November 23, their report was ready to be presented to the LoN’s Council on December 9. What was embarrassing for Turkey, however, was the inclusion of a long paragraph about the recent Turkish deportations of its Christian populations, especially from the border zone.<sup>365</sup> Turkey, therefore, wished to direct the attention of the international public to Syria and especially to the

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<sup>361</sup> Both France and Spain refused such a mission because of a fear that any such mission, even if humanitarian would mean the official recognition of Rif.

<sup>362</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 2-0, R. Schlemmer à L.B. Golden, 23 novembre 1925.

<sup>363</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 156-161, Procès-verbal du CICR, 26 novembre 1925.

<sup>364</sup> More on this rivalry see S. Ferrière, “L’activité de guerre et l’activité de paix des Sociétés nationales de la Croix-Rouge,” *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, N :86 (1926), 65-93.

<sup>365</sup> The copy of this report is also found in the ACICR, curiously among the files concerning the CICR missions to Syria, see ACICR, MIS/ vol.76/2.

repressive French actions there. It, therefore, had every interest in financing a fact-finding mission for a reputed international organization, such as the ICRC.<sup>366</sup> Curiously, it also offered its support to the ICRC for their Riff mission. Moreover, the ICRC, Ihsan Bey, and Tauwik Rouchdi Bey, the Turkish Foreign Minister, would discuss the funding opportunities of the mission directly in Geneva in December 1925.<sup>367</sup> The decision of the LoN to leave Mosul as part of Iraq was taken on December 16, 1925, just a month after the French-British agreement.<sup>368</sup> The next day, on December 17, 1925, a friendship agreement was signed between Turkey and the USSR.<sup>369</sup>

The treaty with the USSR, whereby Bolshevik Russia was to ensure the territorial integrity of Turkey, was interpreted as being directed at Great Britain. It was said there was even a clause regarding the Armenians. Moscow had reportedly given assurance that no attacks would be allowed from the territory of Armenia, and Turkey would concentrate all its efforts on Mosul, to resolve the issue by force, if needed, with Moscow's help.<sup>370</sup>

This fact-finding mission to Syria, its timing, and especially the mutual benefits from the cooperation, would soon open a new era in relations between the French mandatory authorities, the LoN, and other international organizations regarding the settlement of the refugees in Syria. In post-revolt Syria, everything from elections to the settlement of the refugees was informed by this major event. The new reality dictated more collaborative efforts on the part of France, especially in her relations with the LoN, to restore the damaged French prestige. The French authorities feared that any withdrawal from Syria, either voluntarily or by the request of the LoN, would result in the loss of respect and authority in the other French colonies. Hence, there was an urgent need to push forward the French civilizing mission in Syria, which was aimed at economic development and, which we already know, went hand-in-hand with the refugee settlement.

On December 17, 1925, the main discussion topic in the French parliament was Syria and the Syrian Revolt. The parliament witnessed a shockingly similar debate to the one that had occurred six years earlier, on the eve of the Armenian massacres in Aleppo (1919). Aristide

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<sup>366</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 432.

<sup>367</sup> ACICR, MIS / vol. 76, 5-8, visite d'A. Ishan bey au CICR, dec. 1925.

<sup>368</sup> The first destination of the newly appointed French High Commissioner Henry de Jouvenel was London, before heading to Syria. An agreement was achieved between Paris and London to cooperate closely in the Middle East. *Chicago Tribunal*, (New York) November 2, 1925, cited in "Frans-Britianakan Hamadzaynutryune Merdzavor Arevelki masin" [Franco-British Agreement regarding the Middle East], *Yerevan*, November 26, 1925, 4.

<sup>369</sup> "Barekamakan Dashnagrutyune me Turkio ev Khorherdayin Miuytyan Mijev" [Friendship Treaty between Turkey and the USSR], *Yerevan*, December 24, 1925, 4; "Turko-Khorherdayin Hamadzaynagire," [The Turkish-Soviet Agreement], *Yerevan*, December 27, 1925, 1.

<sup>370</sup> Editorial, "Hayeru Dem" [Against the Armenians], *Nor Pyunik*, January 23, 1926, 1.

Briand, the president of the French Council and the Foreign Minister, announced that “France went to Syria *not as a conqueror but on the invitation of the Syrians. She is there for a civilizing mission. France cannot leave Syria now, as massacres will follow.*”<sup>371</sup> Fortunately, this time, he did not mention anything about the Armenians, either in the context of massacres or civilizing missions. These announcements had not gone unnoticed in Syria. *Ahd al-Jadid* was quick to declare that the Syrians had lived in progress and modernity long before the establishment of the mandate, and they were civilized enough. The *civilization mission* could be done in central Africa.<sup>372</sup> Instead, *La Syrie*, the mouthpiece of the French High Commissioner, published an article under the title “Land and Working Hands,” in which the Armenian refugees were praised as civilizing elements, whose settlement in the lands close to the desert in agricultural colonies promised to develop the country quickly.<sup>373</sup> Was it an early indirect attempt to manipulate the Syrian mood for the future refugee settlement schemes? One point is clear; mutually beneficial cooperation soon started between the fact-finding mission, which managed to secure a permanent presence in Syria, and the French mandatory authorities, a relationship that will be studied in the next chapters.

### **The fact-finding mission and the emergence of the joint refugee settlement scheme**

On December 7, 1925, Schlemmer sent his first report from Beirut stating that the number of *refugees*, who were, in reality, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), was 9,000. Schlemmer suggested that his colleagues in Geneva should appoint a delegate for a short mission to deal with the issue effectively. He even had a candidate in mind, Georges Burnier, who was in Istanbul.<sup>374</sup> Three days later, on December 10, de Jouvenel confirmed the creation of an Aid Committee (Comité de Secours), donating 20,000 francs, and asked the President of the ICRC, Gustave Ador, to confirm the arrangement. De Jouvenel also insisted on having the new Committee under the auspices of the ICRC as an international “humanitarian” intervention. This is how the “humanitarian” aspect of the French refugee settlement began. On December 18, 1925, Committees headed by Burnier were created in Beirut and Damascus.<sup>375</sup> At the end of January 1926, Burnier reported that there was nothing for him to do; many local

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<sup>371</sup> “Vijabanutyunner Fransiakan Tserakuyti ev Khorherdanri Mej: Penleve-i ev Briand -I Jarere: Sirian Toghul Ankareli e” [Disagrrment on Syria in the French Parliament, Briand’s Speech: It is Impossible to Leave Syria], *Nor Pyunik*, December 23, 1925, 3.

<sup>372</sup> “Arab Mamuli Organnere: Ahd al-Jadid ev Briane Haytararutyunnere” [Arab Press: Ahd al-Jadid on the Announcements of Briand], *Nor Pyunik*, January 5, 1926, 3.

<sup>373</sup> “Land and Working Hands,” *La Syrie* cited in “Hogh ev Bazukner,” *Nor Pyunik*, January 13, 1926, 3.

<sup>374</sup> ACICR, MIS /vol. 76, 5-7, Rapport de R. Schlemmer au CICR, 3-6 decembre 1925.

<sup>375</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 440.

organizations dealt efficiently with the IDPs, and he had neither money nor resources at his disposal to do anything meaningful.<sup>376</sup> This notwithstanding, Burnier would stay in Beirut until 1939 once he discovered the “real refugees.”

The first good news arrived just days after Burnier’s discouraging report to Geneva. De Jouvenel informed him that a whole paragraph was included in the French annual report to the LoN on “the useful and much-appreciated activities of the ICRC in Syria.” The latter’s efforts to centralize all the funding initiatives to the IDPs and the refugees had been especially acknowledged.<sup>377</sup> In the report, Schlemmer was named, and special gratitude was addressed to him.<sup>378</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that merely two weeks later, a decision was made to prolong the ICRC mission in Syria, considering “the moral support of the ICRC; but especially the encouragement and the support that ICRC mission received (from the French authorities).”<sup>379</sup>

It was clear that this was mutually beneficial cooperation; the French needed the support of this international body and to be praised for their *humanitarian actions* in dealing with the refugee crises that the Revolt had created (which would help restore the lost prestige) while the ICRC needed a new international mission to maintain its position vis-à-vis the LoN. Unsurprisingly, Schlemmer started an energetic campaign in Geneva promoting *French humanitarian efforts* in Syria. He even visited the French consul in Geneva in person, giving him a copy of an article that described his trip to Syria and offering his availability to attend the LoN’s session in Rome to let everyone know about the French sanitary and humanitarian projects.<sup>380</sup> In the end, the French authorities did not make use of these proposed services; nevertheless, Schlemmer used the opportunity to ask for a subvention from the LoN for the ICRC’s mission in Syria, giving the prior example of Russia.<sup>381</sup>

On April 25, 1926, Suwayda (the capital of Jabal al-Druze) was taken by the French forces, and most of the IDPs were encouraged to return. For Burnier, it was clear that his mission was about to end. This is when, during one of his meetings with Dr. Duguet, the newly appointed Director of de Service de Santé du Haut-Commissariat, and the principal doctor of the French forces, he discovered a new opportunity. Dr. Duguet told him that in Syria, there were *two* types of refugees: the temporary ones, who were the victims of the current upheaval,

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<sup>376</sup> ACICR, MIS / vol. 76, 5-51, G. Burnier à R. Schlemmer, 29 janvier 1926.

<sup>377</sup> It must be said that, besides funds received from the Syrian-Lebanese committee, other funds arrived from the following national Red Cross branches: Turkish, Soviet, and Spanish. Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 451.

<sup>378</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-58, G. Burnier à R. Schlemmer, 1 février 1926.

<sup>379</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 2-63, R. Schlemmer à G. Burnier, 12 février 1926.

<sup>380</sup> Raymond Schlemmer, délégué général du Comité international, “Mission en Syrie,” *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, 8eme année, N : 85, (1926).

<sup>381</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 451.

and the permanent ones, the Armenian refugees in the camps, who could not return to their hometowns and needed to be settled in Syria. The only issue that remained was the financial aspect of such a large-scale settlement.<sup>382</sup> Intrigued by this news and sensing a further opportunity for the ICRC, Burnier immediately asked Schlemmer to meet with all the potentially interested partners in Geneva, including Nansen, Albert Thomas, (head of the ILO), Major Johnson (head of the ILO's refugee section) and discuss the settlement opportunities for the Armenians refugees in Syria.

Burnier was explicit in his special report devoted to the *Armenian issue in Syria*; the situation of these refugees preoccupied him, despite his “lack of sympathy for these people.”<sup>383</sup> The reason was simple, it promised a stable job for him in Beirut. Indeed, Burnier would remain in Syria until the end of 1930s. Burnier reported on his inspiring meeting with Dr. Monnier, the representative of *L'Action Chrétienne en Orient*, in Aleppo, and the achievements of Jeppe in the establishment of the small-scale agricultural colonies. Notably, earlier that year, Monnier had already pleaded with the CICR to interfere on behalf of the Armenian refugees in Syria by providing financial means for the large-scale establishment of agricultural colonies similar to Jeppe's and with the example of Greece.<sup>384</sup> In another report, Burnier proposed a pragmatic solution; “Given the nationality (French) and the influence of Albert Thomas, (the Director of the ILO), he might be decisive in this issue.”<sup>385</sup> Future events would confirm his predictions.

Meanwhile, Schlemmer met Major Johnson to propose the ICRC collaboration. Dr. Duguet, for his part, was in active correspondence with Albert Thomas, inviting ILO's urgent attention to the conditions of the Armenian refugees.<sup>386</sup> There was no time to lose. Two days later, after he had asked Schlemmer to use Thomas's nationality and French connections to further their settlement plan, Schlemmer addressed de Jouvenel directly. The latter was urged to ask for the LoN's and ILO's support in the Armenian refugee settlement in Syria during the inter-governmental meeting that was to be convened in less than two weeks under an initiative by Nansen. It was believed there was a good chance of a positive response, in which case ICR's Beirut seat was to be the executive agency.<sup>387</sup> De Jouvenel, in his turn, had been on an inspiring mission to Jerusalem only two months earlier, where he was greatly impressed by the Jewish colonization results.

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid, 454.

<sup>383</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-88, G. Burnier au CICR, 12 avril 1926.

<sup>384</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-38, Dr. A. Monnier à G. Ador, 8 janvier 1926.

<sup>385</sup> ACICR, MISS/vol. 76, 5-88, G. Burnier au CICR, 24 avril 1926.

<sup>386</sup> This correspondence could be retrieved in the archives of IOL; BIT, CAT 5/9/2-3, Dr. Duguet à Albert Thomas.

<sup>387</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 2-85, R. Schlemmer à H. de Jouvenel, 26 avril 1926.

I have arrived in the Orient as an anti-Semite, I have become a pro-Zionist ever since and am rather jealous of the British High Commissioner in Palestine and everything that the Zionists bring to him; for there will also be problems with the Arabs, but surely these are temporary, for which the benefits would largely compensate. To develop this country, only three things are needed – money, manpower, and technical abilities. They have brought all three. Whereas we are obliged to support the Christians and their plans, while the Zionists support themselves...<sup>388</sup>

It is noteworthy that de Jouvenel sent this description to Quai d'Orsay the day after he had received Schlemmer's letter asking the French to officially ask for a new settlement scheme for the Armenian refugees in Syria. This was, nevertheless, not the first time he expressed his admiration for the Jewish colonization of Palestine. In fact, merely 10 days before sending this letter to Briand, de Jouvenel had hosted Haïm Weizmann and Colonel Kish, the President of the Zionist Executive Committee, in Beirut. During the meeting, de Jouvenel had not only expressed his admiration for the work done in Palestine but also openly invited them to consider similar colonization projects in Northern Syria (Deir ez-Zor and Palmyra).<sup>389</sup> This came as a surprise to the Zionist leaders and was a clear sign of a changed French policy in Syria. It soon became clear that de Jouvenel did not act alone. In June, the same offer was repeated to Sir Austen Chamberlain by Philippe Berthelot, who also revealed an ongoing secret inquiry in the region (Poidebard mission?), adding that the development of northern Syria by agricultural colonization was an absolute priority for the French and would be possible with only 800 million francs.<sup>390</sup>

This was the situation when de Jouvenel was approached by Schlemmer for international support (financial, moral, and other forms) to settle the Armenian refugees in Syria. Jouvenel was, of course, in favor of such a settlement, as was the Quai d'Orsay. On May 10, 1926, French delegate Edouard de Navailles-Labatut raised the issue during the second session of the intergovernmental meeting of the LoN and was immediately supported by the LoN and the ILO. Considering that the Revolt was about to end, it was decided to keep the whole settlement project low-profile to avoid provoking the locals. In addition, it was agreed that the colonization would mirror similar ongoing agricultural colonization in Palestine.<sup>391</sup>

Since in Syria, the colonizers were to be Armenian refugees, not the Jews, Berthelot had to be careful to do everything possible not to give the wrong impression to the Armenians; for example, they must understand that it had nothing to do with the “national home” promised to

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<sup>388</sup> MAE/P, Palestine 29, H. de Jouvenel à A. Briand, 27 avril 1926, cited in Kévonian, 459.

<sup>389</sup> FO 371, 4190/3112/89, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 459.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, 460.

<sup>391</sup> MAE/P, SDN, 1798, fos 82-133, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 458.

the Armenian refugees between 1918 and 1922, and which had even been discussed several times at the LoN's Assembly.<sup>392</sup> These worries did not stem from fears that another deception awaited the refugees; instead, the concern was Turkey, with whom the French had been conducting negotiations since February 1926 to conclude the "bon-voisinage" (good-neighbor, friendship) treaty. This treaty was finally concluded on May 31, 1926. Turkey had always been against the Armenian settlements in Alexandretta or close to the Syrian-Turkish border. It is noteworthy that, in response to all the Turkish complaints about Jeppe's settlements, the French had claimed that the refugees settled on their own lands, which lay on the other side of the border, and that there was no refugee settlement scheme in northern Syria. During the negotiations for this new treaty, which France wished to conclude as soon as possible, Turkey claimed all the lands belonging to Kilis and other towns so that no one could state that the refugees had settled on their own lands. France ceded these demands willingly, a small concession given the large-scale colonization project in the making. The French authorities also tried to show Turkey their sympathetic attitude by putting the Syrian railway at the Turkish disposal during the Sheikh Said rebellion and also officially insisting that all refugees must settle at least 30 km from the border.<sup>393</sup>

One month later, on June 30, 1926, de Jouvenel officially confirmed the French engagement with the ILO and the LoN. In July 1926, Burnier was already on his way to Beirut as the joint representative of the LoN, the ILO, and the ICRC, responsible for the settlement of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon.

On September 25, 1926, after the plan was already a "fait accompli" and Burnier was firmly settled in Beirut, a resolution was presented to the 5<sup>th</sup> Committee (the Refugee Settlement Committee) during the 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the LoN,<sup>394</sup> "to intervene in Syria for the permanent settlement of the Armenian refugees considering their precarious situation and the numerous calls from the region for intervention."<sup>395</sup>

A large-scale refugee settlement was being created in Syria with the collaboration of many major international organizations. This refugee settlement scheme targeting the Armenian refugees was not the only one. The same international organizations had also pledged their support for another scheme in Soviet Armenia. The next chapter aims to reveal how and why both settlement schemes became increasingly intertwined.

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> CADN-SL 575, le Haut-Commissaire Sarrail au Département, Les affaires Étrangères, 18 mars 1925.

<sup>394</sup> It was composed of Senator Pams (French), MacDonald (British), Bitteli (Italy), Bekston (Germany).

<sup>395</sup> SDN, FMN, C 1470, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 461.



## Chapter IV: The entangled story of the two concurrent refugee settlement schemes

This chapter sheds light on two separate refugee settlement schemes for the Armenian refugees under the auspices of the LoN and the ILO and how they became increasingly intertwined to the point that the realization of the one dictated the complete failure of the other. Before becoming *humanitarian* actions, both schemes had considerable political weight and economic importance.

### The “Nansen” Scheme

On September 25, 1924, the LoN’s Council passed a resolution asking Nansen and the ILO to make a formal inquiry into the possibilities of creating an Armenian settlement plan in the Caucasus. Two days later, Nansen convened a conference in Geneva where it was stated that 300,000 Russian and 200,000 Armenian refugees still needed to be settled. Although repatriation was considered the best solution, the opposition of the Soviet and Turkish authorities made it impossible. It was also decided to send an inquiry commission to Soviet Armenia, headed by Nansen, to check resettlement opportunities.

The Soviet authorities eagerly agreed to host him, according to Soviet historian Meliksetyan, “without big illusions.”<sup>396</sup> On June 14, 1925, the delegation headed by Nansen and composed of experts in different fields (J. Carl, a French agriculture expert; Ch. Dupuis, a British irrigation expert; and P. Lo Savio, an Italian technical expert), arrived in Batumi, where they were greeted by the heads of Soviet Armenia (Mravyan and Lukashin). Nansen declared that the conditions of the Armenian refugees had deteriorated everywhere, including in Greece, Turkey, and Syria.<sup>397</sup> In Soviet Armenia, the greatest obstacle was the shortage of cultivable land and irrigation, which Nansen’s scheme sought to address by securing the LoN’s financial support.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> HAA, fond 40, list 3, file 372, 7, file 454, 200; see also H. Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk Arenchutyunnere ev Hayrenadardutyune*, [Homeland-Diaspora Relations and Repatriations] (Yerevan, 1985), Chapter 4, 125.

<sup>397</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 125-126.

<sup>398</sup> Initially four projects were identified: irrigation of Sardarapat valley, situated 50 km far from Yerevan, irrigation of the Kirr district, immediately East and West of Yerevan, drainage, and irrigation of the Kara Su; and drainage and irrigation of the Zangibassar swamps south-east of Yerevan. The first scheme, which was the largest was rejected based on the heavy costs and time required for its execution, while the other three were recommended. It meant irrigation of about 36.000 hectares of land with an estimated 6.000.000 rubles, on which at least 25.000 refugees were to be settled. See in League of Nations, Armenian refugee settlement commission, report of the Council, C. 328, 1926.II, Geneva, 19 May 1926, [https://biblio-archiv.unog.ch/Dateien/CouncilMSD/C-328-1926-II\\_EN.pdf](https://biblio-archiv.unog.ch/Dateien/CouncilMSD/C-328-1926-II_EN.pdf) (accessed on August 10, 2022).

The joint consultation session between the Nansen Commission and the Armenian government opened in Yerevan on June 17, 1925. The minutes of this session are particularly interesting. Nansen briefed the Soviet authorities on the situation of the Armenian refugees in different countries, stressing that the situation remained extremely precarious, especially for those who were in Greece (about 9,000), Istanbul (800), and also those in Northern Syria (50,000). Moreover, he added,

As an unofficial declaration, I must say that Northern Syria might be handed over to Turkey; in this case, the removal of the refugees from there would follow. In case there is a positive decision regarding the transfer of these 50,000 refugees to Armenia, there might be a possibility to consider acquiring lands adjacent to the Araks and Akhuryan rivers to Armenia (from Turkey) to settle them there. This is my private opinion, of course.<sup>399</sup>

Two days later, during the second session, the Soviet authorities (Yerzenkyan) claimed that if the swamps were drained, the cleared lands would be suitable for the cotton cultivation. During this discussion, the former Armenian territories (Basen, Alashkert) that now lay on the other side of the border in Turkey and were largely deserted and abandoned were once again considered suitable refugee settlement sites.<sup>400</sup> The lands could also be used for the cultivation of cereals. Moreover, another controversial point was discussed; to secure Nansen's support in claiming the huge amounts of funds of the Ottoman Armenians in the European banks, which they were unable to claim.<sup>401</sup> Nansen not only spoke about projects of irrigation and drainage in the current territory of Soviet Armenia but constantly hinted that other Armenian lands lost to Turkey could possibly be demanded in the case of the successful implementation of their project. We shall see later how other colleagues, the representatives of the ILO and the ICRC, gave similar empty hopes to the Armenian leaders of Paris, promising the possible return of Cilicia and even Diyarbakir in exchange for their financial and other support and in view of the success of their rival settlement project in northern Syria.

On the way back, Nansen visited Moscow, where he was received by Chicherin People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and Svirderski, the Commissar of Agriculture.<sup>402</sup> There, they discussed the irrigation scheme and the drainage of the swamps in Armenia at an estimated cost

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<sup>399</sup> HAA, fond 113, list 43, file 292, 33-37, N:16, "The Minutes of the Meeting of the Refugee Settlement Commission of Soviet Armenia and Nansen's Commission," Yerevan, 17 June 1925, in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue – Fridtjof Nansen: Collection of Documents, 1920-1930*, ed. The National Archives of Armenia (Yerevan, 2005) 34.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid, N: 17. 19 June 1925, 38-39.

<sup>401</sup> Indeed, Nansen sent an appeal to Lord Cecil asking his support to make at least the British government's commitment for the funds in the British banks. See in N:31, "Nansen's Letter to Cecil about the Armenian Funds in the European Banks," Geneva, 15 September 1925, in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 76.

<sup>402</sup> HAA, fond 113, list 3, file 373, 1-5. cited in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 125.

of 8 million rubles.<sup>403</sup> By that time, Nansen had already earned a reputation as a pro-Bolshevik.<sup>404</sup> In 1923, *The Times* had even attacked Nansen because he was on friendly terms with the Bolshevik government and had been made an honorary member of the Moscow Soviet.<sup>405</sup> Russian exiled emigrés had taken this opportunity to call for his replacement. Nansen not only argued that all these efforts were necessary to find a solution to the refugee issue, but he also advocated for international recognition of the USSR to prevent a new refugee crisis.<sup>406</sup> Nansen thought there were three ways to get the necessary funds: through donations, loans from European governments, or loans from European banks. He considered the latter the most feasible option given the experience in Greece.<sup>407</sup> This loan, in turn, was to be long-term (15–20 years), have an interest rate of no more than 10%, and, most importantly, be guaranteed by the Soviet and Armenian governments. It should also be overseen by an independent monitoring committee.<sup>408</sup> The Soviet Armenian government agreed on all conditions but the last. What followed next was a long journey that was condemned to failure. Officially, the main reason for the failure was considered to be the rejection of the international monitoring committee by the Soviet authorities.

On July 28, 1925, Nansen submitted his detailed report to the LoN, in which he gave general statistics about the Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia, Transcaucasia, and other countries. Once again, his report was interesting regarding Syria. He revealed that their mission had received a request from the Armenian leaders of Syria, which hosted a large number of refugees (about 100,000), to consider their transfer to Armenia, too. Therefore, Carlier, the French agricultural expert, was sent almost directly from Soviet Armenia to Syria to study the situation. While Carlier's detailed report was yet to arrive, Nansen had already been informed that the settlement of about 10,000 refugees in rural colonies could solve the urgent problems there. He also recommended opening a 1 million French francs fund to this end. It was also in

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<sup>403</sup> It referred to the drainage of the swamps in Gherer, Sev Jur, and Zangibasar, which were smaller projects. There was also a much bigger project, namely, the irrigation of Sardarapat desert. HAA, fond 113, list 3, file 820, 3-5.

<sup>404</sup> Nansen visited Moscow for the first time in July 1920, where he met with Chicherin. In a highly ideological context, he was received in Moscow on the basis of his scientific success, rather than as a LoN representative. At that time Nansen was tasked to provide humanitarian relief to Russia. Francesca Piana, "Nansen, Fridtjof," in IO BIO, Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations, ed., Bob Reinalda, Kent J. Kille and Jaci Eisenberg, [www.ru.nl/fm/iobio](http://www.ru.nl/fm/iobio) (Accessed on August 22, 2020).

<sup>405</sup> Michael Marrius, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Temple University Press, 2001), 90.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>407</sup> The LoN had undertaken major technical assistance in Greece after the exchange of the population with the help of loans received from the European countries.

<sup>408</sup> HAA, fond 113, list 3, file 494, 12, fond 113, list 13, file 4, 1-4, in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 127-128.

this report that Nansen spoke of Soviet Armenia as “the only Armenian national home.”<sup>409</sup> Before Carlier had returned from Syria, General Johnson had already sent a telegram to Nansen about his meeting with a representative of the English Quakers, who had just returned from a tour in Syria informing him that the country was home to about 100,000 refugees, out of whom 40% were destitute, 50% lived from hand to mouth, and only 10% had work. Thus, their situation deserved serious and immediate consideration, too. Johnson felt the best option was to wait for Carlier and include his report together with the documents on the settlement in Soviet Armenia.<sup>410</sup>

On September 12, 1925, the “Nansen scheme,” as it was popularly known, had already been introduced and discussed in several committees and sub-committees of the LoN and the ILO. Nansen made an impressive speech in which he highlighted the fact that Soviet Armenia was the number one choice for most of the refugees. This small republic *is a national home* for the Armenians, and by approving this scheme, we would thus realize the “national home” promised to the Armenians in the past.<sup>411</sup> While the speech aimed to appeal to the humanity of the member states and remind them of past promises, the reference to the “national home” in Soviet Armenia was unfortunate since it put the Republic on the same level as many other “home” projects that were under discussion during the entire interwar period.

The scheme was then discussed in the 5<sup>th</sup> Humanitarian Committee of the LoN, on September 18, 1925, before being submitted to a special subcommittee composed of nine persons. In its turn, the latter discussed the scheme’s technical and financial aspects in the September 23 meeting of the same year. There, the British representative declared that his government could not provide a loan to any Soviet country, while the French and Italian representatives announced that their respective governments were ready to give loans on the condition that the British joined them.

Before long, in Paris, a new delegation composed of Nansen, Debrucker, Arthur Soltern (the French representative at the LoN), and Albert Thomas (also French and the head of ILO) met with the Soviet representative Pirumyan, who was the First Secretary in Paris. The main topic of the discussion was the loan issue. More concretely, the delegation aimed to discover whether Soviet Armenia was able to give additional guarantees against the loan. According to Pirumyan, unacceptable conditions were put forward, which meant permanent dependency and

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<sup>409</sup> “Nansen’s Report to the League about the Settlement of the Armenian Refugees,” in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 56-67, 59.

<sup>410</sup> “From Johnson to Nansen”, Geneva, August 13, 1925, in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 68-69.

<sup>411</sup> The text of his speech in HAA fond 113, list 3, file 530, pp 40-54, also included in N:32, Nansen’s Speech before the League’s 6<sup>th</sup> session’s 18<sup>th</sup> meeting, September 26, 1925, *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 77-79.

even questioned the sovereignty of Armenia.<sup>412</sup> Pirumyan reported to the Armenian government that all these discussions did not seem to give the desired result; nevertheless, it was positive in terms of pro-Soviet propaganda, since Nansen and the others praised Soviet Armenia in their speeches presenting it as “truly democratic, with remarkable economic achievements, and trustworthy.”<sup>413</sup>

The issue was then discussed at the League’s 5<sup>th</sup> session on September 25, 1925. Here, it was decided to settle Armenian refugees in the Caucasus *or elsewhere* by appointing a five-member committee to check the feasibility of the Nansen project.<sup>414</sup> The first session of this committee took place at the end of October, where Pirumyan, as well as representatives of the Central Armenian Refugee Committee of Paris (Pashalian, Sinapian, and Papajanian), were invited and heard. It was decided to send William Macintosh, a technical engineer, to Soviet Armenia to check the technical aspects of the project. Macintosh, who left for Soviet Armenia almost immediately, spent almost two months there, returning in February 1926. He confirmed in his report the feasibility of the project technically and judged it profitable. The only issue, according to him, remained the issue of the additional guarantees from the Soviet Central Bank. As an alternative, he suggested putting the harvest of the cultivated fields as a guarantee.

On March 12–13, 1926, another session of the League’s 5<sup>th</sup> committee headed by Jules Pams, the French representative, met in Geneva, at which Nansen, MacDonald, and others were present. Macintosh’s report was presented, once again evaluating the project as feasible and profitable, but the issue of the loan still persisted.<sup>415</sup> By September 1926, it was clear that one year after the creation of the 5<sup>th</sup> committee, the project to settle the Armenian refugees by finding the necessary funds had failed. Tellingly, the committee’s comprehensive document on the settlement of the Armenian refugees not only reported on the Nansen scheme but also on the Armenian refugees of Syria, the latter review being signed by Thomas Albert. It reported that there were 100,000 Armenian refugees in precarious conditions in the camps in Beirut and Aleppo. Even if any major refugee transfer to Soviet Armenia were to happen in the near future, only a maximum of 15,000 refugees could be moved. Meanwhile, there was an urgent need to find a solution for the 60,000 refugees in Syria, 32,000 in Greece, 10,000 in Bulgaria and 4,000

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<sup>412</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 135-136.

<sup>413</sup> HHA, file 113, list 3, file 296, 44-47, N: 50, Pirumyan’s letter to the Assembly, on the League’s Meeting on 19 March, Paris, March 29, 1926, *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 108-110; Meliksetyan, 135-136.

<sup>414</sup> The Committee members were Jules Pams (senator, former minister, he was the chairmen), Bergmann (former under-secretary of state in the German finance ministry), Conti Rossini (late secretary-general of the Italian treasury), Murdoch Macdonald (later Secretary of State for Public Works in Egypt) and Dr. Fridtjof Nansen.

<sup>415</sup> “Gaghtakanneru Teghavorume,” [The Settlement of the Refugees], *Suriakan Mamul* April 14, 1926, 2.

in Istanbul. That was the reason for sending two LoN delegations to Brazil and Argentine to check the settlement possibilities there.<sup>416</sup>

Jules Pams would soon be informed that “France as the mandatory power has sought to improve the conditions of the Armenian refugees in Syria; her first action being the coordination of private initiatives in conformity with the Article 22 of the mandate...”<sup>417</sup> Burnier would be sent to Beirut under the triple auspices of the League, the ILO and the ICCR.

The report of the 5<sup>th</sup> committee did not go unnoticed by the Soviet authorities. The Communist organ *Yerevan* commented that not only did the imperialists make the Armenians poor and *homeless* refugees, but now they also attempted to use them as cheap labor for their projects in South America.<sup>418</sup> Interestingly, *Yerevan* mentioned the new tendency among the refugees to settle in the Syrian countryside in large numbers. This was conditioned not only by the overcrowded cities and miserable camps but also by economic crises. It was believed that more Armenians would settle in the countryside and that agriculture was the future of Syria.<sup>419</sup>

The Soviet authorities became increasingly impatient with the Nansen project and “endless studies” that gave no results. They were especially suspicious about the claimed 12% interest rate that they considered to be too high for such a “humanitarian” project. Meanwhile, 1,600,000 rubles were received from Moscow for the same irrigation project that promised to make 8,000 desatin<sup>420</sup> land available for cotton cultivation the next year. They even boasted that Nansen was to be soon invited to witness the progress achieved entirely by their own means.<sup>421</sup> During the meeting of the Transcaucasian republics in Yerevan at the end of January 1926, it was decided to solve the repatriation issue of 300,000 Armenians with Soviet money.<sup>422</sup> Shahverdian, a high ranking Soviet representative, for his part, suggested replacing the word “refugee” with *karutsogh tarrer* (“building elements”) in order not to insult the refugees.<sup>423</sup>

Meanwhile, the 5<sup>th</sup> subcommittee met again on March 19, 1926, in Paris, and Pirumyan was again invited. It was stated that the project had been, indeed, found feasible; however, the British still refused any funding, and the LoN had to collect donations in the USA and

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<sup>416</sup> “Azgalin Enkerutyune ev Hay ev Rus Gaghtakannere” [The League of Nations and the Armenian and Russian Refugees], *Yerevan*, September 19, 1926, 1; “Albert Thomas-i Haytarautyunnere Gaghtakanneru Masin,” [The Announcements of Albert Thomas about the Refugees], *Yerevan*, September 22, 1926, 1.

<sup>417</sup> MAE/P, SDN, 1798, # 187-191, Note du Département pour J. Pams, 17 septembre 1926.

<sup>418</sup> “Surio Hayere,” [The Armenians of Syria], *Yerevan*, November 8, 1925, 2.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> It was a measurement unit used in the USSR.

<sup>421</sup> “Mardasirakan Tokose” [The Humanitarian Interest Rate], *Nor Pyunik*, January 31, 1926, 1.

<sup>422</sup> Editorial, “Inch Shahecav Hayastane,” [What Did Armenia Gain?], *Nor Pyunik* March 3, 1926, 1.

<sup>423</sup> Editorial, “Herik e Achkakapanke,” [It is Enough to Pretend], *Nor Pyunik*, March 24, 1926, 1.

Europe.<sup>424</sup> At this point, Nansen even tried to give a humanitarian character to the loan by attempting to use his personal contacts and convince the British government.<sup>425</sup> It is interesting to note that the British did not entirely exclude their support; Chamberlain himself told Nansen that given the moral responsibility of the British before the Armenians the “British are willing to contribute to the Armenian loan but cannot do it openly.” Chamberlain thought it would be possible if a substantial amount was committed by other governments and the Armenians themselves. He especially hoped for the participation of Gulbenkian, a wealthy Armenian.<sup>426</sup>

However, any efforts to convince the latter were in vain. All Nansen’s attempts to convince the other member states were equally unsuccessful. It was obvious that in the meantime something had changed and Nansen was powerless to push his settlement plan in the face of the indifference of the member states. What had happened? Did the Nansen scheme fail because of mutual mistrust and suspicion of the various actors, or were there other forces at work? According to the Soviet Armenian historians, LoN’s member states wished to have their representatives on the ground to control the projects, establishing permanent control and making Armenia vulnerable to external aid and interference. The wish of the member states to deal with Soviet Armenia directly was also interpreted as an attempt to isolate it from the USSR. Otherwise, what was the reason for distrusting the guarantees of the Soviet Union via the Bank of Moscow!<sup>427</sup> According to Yerzenkyan,

We never doubted the goodwill of Nansen but never really had big hopes... We hosted Nansen and his delegation in Yerevan for two main reasons: to demonstrate to the Armenian organizations and individuals abroad that there were no big hopes from the Great Powers and the LoN. We gave the LoN that opportunity... we were ready to pay any loans because we were eager to see the refugee issue solved.<sup>428</sup>

In the Soviet accounts, the failure of this project proved that “imperialists and their diplomats were enemies of the Armenians, and the latter should have no expectations from them.”<sup>429</sup> In the same vein, the ensuing repatriations were to be appreciated as accomplished thanks to the “great efforts of the Soviet government, its warm attitude towards the refugees, and Soviet sacrifices.”<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> All the details about this trip and the discussions were published by the LoN, “Scheme for the Settlement of the Armenian Refugees: General Survey and Documents,” Geneva 1927 (IV.1).

<sup>425</sup> See for example his letter to Philip Noel Baker, Lusaker, June 3, 1926, in “Nansen’s Letter to Baker to correct the British Negative Attitude Toward the Loan,” in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 110-112.

<sup>426</sup> “From Nansen to Howland,” Lyusaker, November 25, 1926, in *A Devote of the Armenian*, 135-137.

<sup>427</sup> Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 140.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid*.

The scheme's failure was used to position Soviet Armenia as the only *homeland* since there could be no hope of the imperialists delivering the promised "national home." At the same time, the negotiations with Nansen and the hosting of his delegation had helped the Soviet authorities in Moscow and Yerevan overcome their isolation by gaining access to international bodies such as the LoN. Moreover, the USSR was honored by the visit of an international delegation headed by none other than Nansen. All the discussions on the refugee settlements had also helped the Soviet authorities gain a reputation for being a humanitarian, refugee-hosting country.

Since the settlement in Soviet Armenia was moving forward very slowly and without tangible results, another settlement scheme soon gained prominence. This was the refugee settlement scheme in Syria and Lebanon under the French mandate.

### **The Nansen scheme impasse – victory of the Syrian Jazira?**

On October 11, 1926, Clauzel, the French representative in Geneva, wrote to Berthelot at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. He reported having recently received Albert Thomas, the head of the ILO and a fellow Frenchman. Thomas had stated the "necessity to take care of the Armenian refugees in Syria by targeting two major refugee camps in Beirut and Aleppo, for which he had pledged to find necessary financial means." Thomas even had something concrete to offer; a British donation of 5,000 Livres sterling.<sup>431</sup> In another note sent to Berthelot, he gave more details about this unexpected donation. In September 1926, during the LoN's session, it had been clear that no loans were forthcoming for Nansen's scheme in Armenia. Instead, the meeting of the Phil-Armenians headed by the Armenian Central Refugee Committee suggested using already collected funds for the current issues. This is how 5,000 sterling was proposed in exchange for just a 4% interest rate (it should be noted that for the Soviet authorities, the interest rate had been set at 12%) for improving conditions in the refugee camps of Aleppo and Beirut. Albert Thomas had immediately taken up this opportunity, discussing further cooperation in Syria with de Jouvenel and Berthelot.<sup>432</sup> Clauzel still had to convince Berthelot, who remained hesitant. The former insisted that it was not about any Armenian settlement plan in Syria and Lebanon but a mere improvement of the conditions in the refugee camps.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> MAE, vol. 50/233, #4, Clauzel à ministère des affaires étrangères, Paris, 11 octobre 1926.

<sup>432</sup> MAE, vol. 50/233, #4, Ministères des affaires étrangères, 'Note pour monsieur Berthelot ; avance de 5,000 livres en faveur des réfugiés arméniens en Syrie, Paris, 12 septembre 1926.

<sup>433</sup> MAE/P, Arménie, 21, F 12, B. Clauzel à P. Berthelot, 14 septembre 1926.



The High Commissioner's staff in Beirut sent many explanatory reports to the Department to try to convince them to start a new large-scale refugee settlement scheme in close collaboration with the LoN. One such report, for example, explained that the Department had wrongly understood the scheme, taking it to be the settlement of a new bloc of refugees, whereas the plan involved only the existing refugees.<sup>434</sup> It then described the refugee camp in Beirut and how it shocked foreign visitors and gave a wrong impression. Moreover, its permanent danger as a breeding ground for epidemics was highlighted. Finally, the new neighborhood was to be for *all* refugees and not only for the Armenians. Since the question was urgent, the cooperation of the other organizations was needed to achieve it. It further explained the French mandatory authorities' difficulties in establishing agricultural colonies. These challenges were due to the reluctance of the Armenians, who refused to be dispersed and insisted on staying together and, if possible, remaining closer to the sea, which gave them a feeling of security.<sup>435</sup> Thus, the French authorities needed to create exemplary colonies to attract other Armenian refugees, too. The immediate issues to be addressed were constructing new neighborhoods in Beirut, improving camp conditions in Aleppo, and creating agricultural colonies. In all cases, the demands and the complaints of the locals received by the Department were to be considered.

Tellingly, the report further explained that, although certain Lebano-Syrian circles were always opposed to any support for the refugees, this view was not shared by the majority of the Muslims. In the last part of the document, Reffye, who was secretary to the High Commissioner, reminded the Department that these refugees were in Syria because of the French withdrawal from Cilicia; thus, France could not possibly give up its support because of the local complaints due to its moral obligations, and for the sake of humanity.<sup>436</sup> This was a rare instance when the French authorities acknowledged the dire consequences of the Cilicia withdrawal on the fate of the Armenian refugees. Finally, the lengthy report finished by highlighting the political and economic benefits that such cooperation would bring to wider French interests; the Armenians would reinforce the Christian elements in Lebanon. Moreover, they were hardworking and had remained loyal to the French despite the interventions by the British and American charity

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<sup>434</sup> CADN, SL/1/V/575, De Reffye à chef du Service des Renseignements du Levant, Note, "des arméniens agriculteurs," Beyrouth, 4 novembre 1926.

<sup>435</sup> CADN, SL/1/V/575, Le Ministre Plénipotentiaire, Haut-Commissaire à son excellence, Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires étrangères, "Arméniens établis dans les États sous mandat français," Beyrouth, 2 octobre 1926.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

organizations. Everything indicated that it was in the Department's interest to cooperate with the LoN and the other major charity organizations.<sup>437</sup>

For the French, the financial offer was unexpected but much needed. Moreover, it had arrived at the right moment when the French sought to enhance their prestige by giving a “humanitarian” touch to their actions while improving the appearance of the major cities. Before accepting any help, however, it was necessary to convert the loan into a donation since the French could not pledge to cover the interest rate, even if it was only 4%.<sup>438</sup> Moreover, a new reimbursement scheme would be developed that would lay the foundations of the modern micro-credits. According to this plan, the land would be bought in advance, materials for construction would be provided, and the refugees would have 10 years in which to reimburse the expenses monthly, eventually becoming the owners of their houses. This notwithstanding, the overall settlement would be considered a “humanitarian action” and the result of the “goodwill” of the French mandatory authorities.

The French authorities, on their part, had immediately embarked on finding the necessary financial means. In August 1926, even before the meeting of the LoN's Assembly in September, the French introduced a new law in Lebanon allowing the state to allocate 3 million francs from the state budget for the construction of new urban neighborhoods for the settlement of the refugees in the *Quarantine* camp. This allocation from the state budget has encouraged certain historians to argue that the French refugee settlement was being done entirely at the expense of the locals and under conditions of widespread opposition.<sup>439</sup> It must be noted, however, that as the whole operation was far from being “humanitarian” because the refugees would have to reimburse their settlement costs, it was also far from being at the expense of the locals. The money was taken from the Lebanese state budget, from the Ottoman debt. Later, Ponsot and Reffye made sure that the reimbursement of this money would not be put in the working capital (*fonds de roulement*), as the ILO had determined initially. Instead, the money was to be refunded to the Lebanese government.<sup>440</sup> In the same way, all the French-allocated funds would be repaid by the end of the mandate.

As for the opposition in the Lebanese parliament, there was, indeed a small circle headed by Omar Daouk, who insisted that, instead of building a separate neighborhood for the Armenians, it was better to disperse them to facilitate their assimilation. Another argument was

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> MAE, vol. 50/233, #4, Ministère des affaires étrangères, “Note pour monsieur Berthelot.”

<sup>439</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-1939,” *Past and Present*, N:235 (2017), 141-178.

<sup>440</sup> CADN, SL//1/V/2388, P.V. de Reffye au Département, 6 mai 1927; also Kévonian, *Réfugiés*, 476, 478.

that if money was to be allocated to the Armenian refugees, similar funds should be allocated to the destitute locals too.<sup>441</sup> A French intelligence report confirmed that, despite the opposition in the parliament, which was not shared by everyone, the local government in the regions (governors, mutasarif, and mudir) were all keen to cooperate to establish Armenian agricultural colonies. It also explained the opposition in the parliament by the fact that while the Armenians had become citizens, they did not assimilate, which the locals wished to address.<sup>442</sup>

The French authorities, in their turn, insisted that it was not “humanitarian” aid but an “urgent sanitary and hygienic” intervention to prevent epidemics. In the end, the funds were obtained successfully and put at the disposal of SHAP (Service Sanitaire et Hygiène du Haut-Commissariat). Another 3,000 sterling was soon obtained in Geneva from the sale of Nansen stamps.<sup>443</sup> Moreover, it was even considered that the Nansen stamp scheme should be applied in Syria and Lebanon for the Armenian refugees too. By that time, however, not only Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon had received citizenship (1924) but also had successfully voted in the Representative Council elections of Greater Lebanon (June 1925) and Aleppo (January 1926).

When the financial aspect was secured, Burnier had already returned from his fact-finding mission in Aleppo (October 3–4, 1926) with detailed information about the refugees. Was it by coincidence or design that a vigorous campaign started immediately against the refugee camps, especially in Beirut, prompting fears of the plague and other epidemics? About 100 refugee tents were burned down, and those who stayed without shelter were immediately reallocated to the agricultural colonies created in Tyr and Sidon (Southern Lebanon). At the beginning of December, new sites were allocated, too (Ras Al-Ayn in Lebanon). The refugees were settled as tenants; the land, housing, animals, and food were provided, and the refugees also brought with them livestock, seeds, and tools.<sup>444</sup>

### **Refugees, citizens yet also stateless**

While the financial situation was gradually improving, another issue created a minor crisis between Burnier and Schlemmer. When, at the beginning of August 1926, Burnier’s report arrived in Geneva, it raised more concern than satisfaction. It reported that “the personal status

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<sup>441</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-120bis G. Burnier au Major Johnson, 18 août 1926.

<sup>442</sup> CADN-SL 575, De Reffye à chef du Service des Renseignements du Levant, Note, “des arméniens agriculteurs,” Beyrouth, 4 novembre 1926.

<sup>443</sup> These so-called stamps were the identity cards delivered to Armenian and Russian refugees, for which refugees paid and which later were used for the refugee settlement schemes.

<sup>444</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 470.

issue of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon is definitely solved... they had automatically become citizens by the Lausanne treaty and by the N:2825 decision of Weygand.”<sup>445</sup> Schlemmer exclaimed in horror, “This is impossible! If there are not stateless refugees, it would be very difficult... to justify financial aid to them and “*toute notre affaire tombera à l’eau*” (All our efforts would be in vain). Moreover, how would it be possible to introduce the Nansen stamps in Syria?<sup>446</sup> The refugee status had been clarified just months ago, in May 1926, during the same inter-governmental meeting in which France had demanded an international intervention in Syria. By this definition, the legal status of a “refugee” applied initially only to two refugee groups – the Russians and the Ottoman Armenians.<sup>447</sup>

As expected, Major Johnson explained that any ILO intervention in Syria could only be done on behalf of *stateless* Armenians. Burnier was even more shocked, “they had been expelled from their homeland, they have lost their previous status and all their properties... what was the issue to prevent them from their right to benefit from the international support?”<sup>448</sup> To save the mission and his position, Burnier sent another note to Major Johnson directly. He explained that,

In the Levant, there was a distinction between nationality and citizenship. Were not the Armenians Armenian, when they were Turkish subjects?... They are surely the citizens of this county, but only one among many different races and communities. Were not the 10,000 Armenians who lived in Syria before the arrival of the refugees still Armenian despite their citizenship? It will be the same for the new ones; apart from a few intellectuals, no refugee seems to be nationalist anyway. Here if asked, people will reply, I am a Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Metwali... in the same way Armenians will also remain Armenians...<sup>449</sup>

Ponsot, who in the meanwhile had replaced de Jouvenel as High Commissioner, agreed. “They (Armenians) have not been integrated among the natives: they do not enjoy the sympathy of the locals and have all the characteristics of an ethnic group who has asked for shelter abroad after having been forced out of their homeland by political events.”<sup>450</sup> According to Kévonian this peculiar situation regarding the legal status of the Armenian refugees and their settlement plan under the LoN’s auspices was the main reason the French authorities were reluctant to extend refugee status to other refugees in Syria (such as Assyrians and Kurds). This issue was

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<sup>445</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-119 G. Burnier à R. Schlemmer, 7 août 1926.

<sup>446</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 2-101 R. Schlemmer à G. Burnier, 24 août 1926.

<sup>447</sup> Arrangement relating to the Legal Status of Russian and Armenian refugees, June 30, 1928, League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. 89, no. 2005, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dd8cde56.html> (accessed on May 30, 2020).

<sup>448</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-121 G. Burnier au CICR, 4 septembre 1926.

<sup>449</sup> ACICR, MIS/vol. 76, 5-132 G. Burnier au major Johnson 22 octobre 1926.

<sup>450</sup> MAE/P, SDN, 1799, f.6, H. Ponsot au Département, 26 novembre 1926.

due to be debated at the LoN Assembly on December 6, 1926, and the French feared that any discussion on the topic would inevitably open up the issue of the Armenians.<sup>451</sup> The latter, by now, were both refugees and citizens. A solution was proposed by Albert Thomas, who simply suggested to Dr. Duguet that the LoN's opinion should not be asked and that care should be taken in referring to the Armenians' legal status... so that they could continue to enjoy all the "privileges" that the status of refugee offered them.<sup>452</sup>

Thus, the settlement scheme in Jazira was conceived while the future of the Nansen project remained unclear. Thomas openly revealed to Reffye his doubts that the Nansen project had any chances of succeeding:

because the whole thing rather looked like a Soviet disguised strategy to secure an important loan... Worse, it might even create problems for our project in Syria. Our friend Nansen remains very much attached to his idea of an Armenian Home. As for me, I am really happy about the positive results that we shall achieve together.<sup>453</sup>

It was clear to everyone but Nansen that the Syrian settlement project came at the expense of the Soviet Armenia settlement plan. While Albert Thomas blamed the whole problem on the political situation and the Soviets, who were trying to get a disguised loan, he was increasingly uneasy about how to deal with Nansen. He suggested that Major Johnson should tell Nansen the truth, but carefully, to avoid confrontation. Thus, a new formula was found for accommodating Nansen and other Phil-Armenian actors, especially the British, who might hesitate to support the Syrian scheme under the French mandate. This formula was the suggestion that the financial support should be put in a Revolving Fund, which, after the final settlement of the Armenian refugees in Syria, was to be made available for the Yerevan scheme "if still in existence."<sup>454</sup> Nansen was to be informed that, in his absence, an agreement had been reached in Paris in support of the Syrian settlement scheme. He was to be assured that it was an "emergency intervention" in Syria to improve the conditions of the refugees in the camps. Responsibility for the move was given to Bérard, a well-known personality among the Armenians who knew both Armenia and Syria well. "Bérard proposed to place Armenian refugees of Syria in the bloc in Alexandretta and close to Cilicia and believed that in the near future, it would be possible to penetrate to Urfa and until Diyarbakir to join with Soviet Armenia..."<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 465.

<sup>452</sup> BIT, CAT 5-9-2/3, A. Thomas au Dr. Duguet, 8 janvier 1927, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 466.

<sup>453</sup> SDN, FMN, C1429, A. Thomas à P. Verchère de Reffye, 8 janvier 1927, cited in *ibid*, 467.

<sup>454</sup> SDN, FMN, C1430, Du major Johnson à A. Thomas, 22 janvier 1927.

<sup>455</sup> SDN, FMN, C1430, A. Thomas au major Johnson en vue d'une lettre à F. Nansen, 16 janvier 1927.

In the initial stage, there was to be no word about the “Armenian home,” nor was this settlement to be a rival for the other Soviet Armenian settlement plan. It was easy to convince Nansen because otherwise, no British Phil-Armenian organizations would agree to support the Syrian scheme.<sup>456</sup> After persuading Nansen, the next organization to impress and win over for the Syrian scheme was the Armenian Central Refugee Committee of Paris, headed by Pashalian. Johnson met Pashalian in March (1927), convincing him to allocate their 150,000 sterling for the Syrian scheme instead of Soviet Armenia, with the agreement that other funds would be made available for the “establishment of the Armenian ‘national home’ or other Armenian settlement work, such, for example, as the introduction into Syria of Armenian refugees from Greece and Bulgaria.”<sup>457</sup> Not only was the Syrian scheme being born, it was being done, with constant references to the “Armenian home,” with the possible transfer of the new Armenian refugees from Greece to Syria. However, all this soon exploded in the form of a new crisis, discussed in Part IV.

Schlemmer, who by now was convinced that ILO supported the plan, asked Burnier to develop the Syrian project in a way that was efficient and feasible, unlike the Yerevan plan. Rapid action was needed, especially now that Thomas was in charge of discrediting the Yerevan scheme to the private organizations that had previously considered supporting it financially. Schlemmer was also convinced that much prudence was needed to prevent Nansen or any “Soviet agent” from creating “troubles.” Burnier, for his part, argued that Northern Syria and Cilicia also boasted a historic legitimacy because both had been a “home” for Armenian populations since medieval times and up until 1914, which was as valid an argument for a settlement as that for the Armenian settlement in Transcaucasia. The difference was that the French mandate inspired much greater confidence than the Soviet regime.<sup>458</sup>

Burnier and Schlemmer then started an aggressive campaign against the Yerevan scheme intending to discredit it and obtain the collected funds for the Syrian settlement plan for the same Armenian refugees. Many conferences were organized to this effect at the University of Geneva, where Georges Werner, a member of ICRC, a professor of law, and a member of Burnier’s family, took the lead. Soon the results of this work started to appear. The March edition of *The World’s Children*, which was the organ of the British *Save the Children fund*, published an article penned by Schlemmer propagating in favor of giving the collected funds

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> SDN, FMN, C1430, From Major Johnson to Mr. Schlemmer, 10 March 1927.

<sup>458</sup> ACICR/MIS/vol 76, 2-87, R. Schlemmer à G. Burnier, 29 avril 1926.

to the Syrian scheme and proposing instead the magic formula to make available the reimbursed funds for other settlement schemes elsewhere.<sup>459</sup>

Meanwhile, the only country that had pledged funds to the Yerevan scheme was, ironically, France; the French committee headed by Bérard had promised 336,000 francs. Although initially the money was dedicated to Soviet Armenia, it had been taken from the French contribution to the LoN's budget. As we can guess, the French mandatory authorities had no difficulty convincing Bérard to allocate these funds to the Syrian scheme instead. Unlike the Yerevan scheme, more money was soon allocated to the Syrian Jazira scheme since AGBU (with 11,500 sterling), Lord Mayor's Fund,<sup>460</sup> Save the Children, and Friends of Armenia allocated about 21,000 sterling.<sup>461</sup> Even Nansen was urged to allocate his collected 3,000 sterling for the settlement of the Armenian refugees in Syria (instead of Soviet Armenia).

Notably, Nansen warned Albert Thomas that it could not be a *permanent settlement* since Syria was not the homeland of these refugees, and no one could guarantee that there would not be issues later between the locals and the refugees. The transfer of the funds was possible since moving the refugees from Syria to Soviet Armenia had never been considered, and if the money could help to improve their conditions, then it should be made available. Once again, he took the opportunity to stress the importance of helping Soviet Armenia, which had been hit by a large earthquake.<sup>462</sup> A week later, Nansen, after reading Major Johnson's report about his trip to Syria, penned another urgent note to Albert Thomas. Johnson had explicitly recommended the settlement of the Armenian refugees of Syria in small rural colonies close to military units. Moreover, he had gone as far as to suggest the transfer of more Armenian refugees to Syria, "given the delay of the Yerevan scheme as a result of the recent earthquake in Armenia."<sup>463</sup> Although Nansen voiced his disagreement with these plans – the permanent settlement, the site (close to military troops), and the transfer of new refugees – it was clear that he was already sidelined. Just a month later, this became obvious to Nansen, too; no funding was forthcoming from the USA for his scheme, while more and more foundations were interested in the Syrian

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<sup>459</sup> ACICR/MIS/vol. 76, 2-133, R. Schlemmer à G. Burnier, (strictement personnelle et confid.), 15 mars 1927.

<sup>460</sup> Lord Mayor's fund had already transferred its activity center from Soviet Armenia to Syria in May 1925. It was said that its decision to focus on Syria rather than Soviet Armenia had been conditioned by the recent confrontations between London and Moscow, "Lord Mayor Fund Syriayum" [Lord Mayor's Fund in Syria], *Suriakan Mamul*, May 8, 1925, 4.

<sup>461</sup> Archives of the Antelias Catholicosate, file 66/1, from Noratunmkin to Sahak II, "Settlement of the Refugees," November 23, 1923, cited in Yeghiayan, *Jamanakakits Patmutyun*, 257.

<sup>462</sup> "From Nansen to Albert Thomas, about the Support to the Armenian Refugees in Syria" Lyusaker, January 4, 1927, in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 140-141.

<sup>463</sup> "Nansen to Albert Thomas, about the Support to the Armenian Refugees in Syria and the Opposition of Transferring of New Refugees to Syria," Lyusaker, January 11, 1927, *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 143-144.

scheme, which was being done under the auspices of the League and the French mandatory authorities and “inspired more confidence.”<sup>464</sup>

In the meantime, two separate Armenian settlement schemes were ongoing, the Yerevan and the Syrian, under two different organizations – the LoN and the ILO. Nansen was worried, feeling that the parallel schemes were unfortunate and bound to cause confusion.<sup>465</sup> Although it was clear that the Yerevan scheme had failed, Nansen still tried his best to push it forward. He did not wait to see the outcome of the endless discussions. First, he tried to convince Gulbenkian to allocate some funds but failed. He then repeatedly urged the Soviet authorities to take over the funding of the irrigation costs, hoping that the LoN would then fund the settlement and transfer.<sup>466</sup> Nansen also turned down a suggestion from the British Friends of Armenia to create a new joint committee to deal with the settlement of the Armenian refugees regardless of the geographical location to avoid having two parallel schemes.<sup>467</sup> However, Nansen soon had to abandon the Yerevan scheme given the reactions (or the absence of any reactions) from the Soviet authorities.<sup>468</sup> In September 1928, Nansen addressed the Assembly of the LoN and officially declared that the Yerevan scheme was closed.<sup>469</sup>

Meanwhile, active negotiations were taking place between the ICRC, ILO, and the French mandatory authorities between September 1926 and June 1927.<sup>470</sup> A Refugee Central Committee in support of the Armenian refugees was created in Beirut on December 31, 1926, with branches in Beirut, Aleppo, and Alexandretta to provide funds and oversee the whole settlement.<sup>471</sup> The involvement of the AGBU, the biggest Armenian philanthropic organization, and the Armenian Central Refugee Committee of Paris was ensured, too. Another key personality in this new structure was Senator Victor Bérard, the good friend of the Armenians, who was the president of the French subcommittee in charge of the settlement of the Armenian refugees, initially in Soviet Armenia. As we know, this subcommittee was the only one that had pledged financial support for the Yerevan scheme. The first meeting was convened in Geneva to discuss the Syrian settlement scheme in December 1926. It was attended by Thomas,

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<sup>464</sup> “Letter of Charles Howland,” New York, January 31, 1927; “Letter of Geo. F. Gracy to Nansen,” London, February 7, 1927, in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 147-148.

<sup>465</sup> *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 175.

<sup>466</sup> HAA 113, list 3, file 604, 57, Ibid, 178.

<sup>467</sup> “Nansen to Friends of Armenia of London, on the Incompatibility of Erevan and Syria schemes,” Lyusaker, August 18, 1927, *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 181.

<sup>468</sup> From Nansen to Backer, “The Delay of the Negotiations with the Armenian Government on the Settlement of the Refugees, and the Inexplicable Position of the Armenian Government,” Lyuasker, August 25, 1927, in HHA, 113, list 3, file 604, page 38, cited in *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 186-188.

<sup>469</sup> The text of his speech, see in HAA, fond 40, list 3, file 820, 4, also *A Devote of the Armenian Issue*, 194 -198.

<sup>470</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 469.

<sup>471</sup> CADN-SL 576, Arrêté 694, 31 decembre 1926, cited in Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 470-471.



Schlemmer, Johnson, Pashalian, and Bérard, as well as Miss Pye, and Mr. Brackhouse from the British Phil-Armenian organizations. According to their fact-finding mission, 40,000 refugees out of a total of 86,500 were in precarious conditions in Syria and Lebanon and urgent intervention was required.<sup>472</sup> There was no time to waste.

Over the next couple of years, many high-ranking French authorities were busy discussing the settlement details, the scale, geographical location, details of the reimbursement, and the LoN's loan.<sup>473</sup> While the French authorities were at first reluctant to receive the funds in the form of a loan, they were to change their position quickly. Maugras, the French ambassador in Ankara, was against the French paying for the loan and the plan to settle the refugees along the Syrian-Turkish border, which would endanger border security.<sup>474</sup> However, Poincaré, the Minister of Finance, disagreed, "if Armenian refugees are settled according to the French wishes and in a way that will suit the French politics the best, then no objection." He also thought that the scheme would cost at least 35 million francs, contrary to Dr. Duguet, who evaluated it at only 15–20 million.<sup>475</sup> Poincaré explained to the still hesitant Foreign Ministry that, more than the financial side, it was the political side that was important. In basic terms, it was a humanitarian action that had a certain political weight, "We aim to settle the refugees along the Turkish-Syrian border. It is to our advantage to have Christian populations in this region, whose interests turn towards the French and separate the Syrian and Turkish Muslims. Considering their past experience, they will help us to defend them in case of danger."<sup>476</sup> Thus, his view was that if the refugees' settlement in that region was a priority, then the financial side of the question was secondary.

Dr. Duguet, for his part, made detailed financial calculations and compiled information about the refugees, regions, available lands, and suitable neighborhoods. He advised caution and counseled that the settlement should be implemented in several stages throughout several years since it was experimental. He also stated that the lessons learned from the previous settlement experiments should be applied. In all cases, he concluded that 10 years was sufficient for the refugees to reimburse the loans for "Armenians were very eager to become owners."

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<sup>472</sup> ACICR/MIS/1-76,2, Report on mission undertaken for the purpose of studying the problems of the Armenian refugees in the Mandated States of Lebanon and Syria, 31 decembre 1926.

<sup>473</sup> CADN-SL 575 Établissement arméniens, Dépêche 603, 30 aout 1927, N:172, 18 mars 1927, N: 674, 28 septembre 1927.

<sup>474</sup> CADN-SL 575, Project d'emprunt propose par Albert Thomas), Télégramme N : 450/6, 451/6, du Maugras à Diplomatie Paris, 10 Septembre 1928.

<sup>475</sup> CADN-SL 575 Le Ministre des affaires étrangères à Monsieur Ponsot, Haut-Commissaire "Installation des réfugiés arméniens en Syrie," Paris, 27 août 1928.

<sup>476</sup> CADN-SL 575 Le Président du Conseil, Ministre des Finances à M. le Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, Service Française de la S.D.N., "Établissement des Réfugiés arméniens en Syrie," Paris, 11 août 1928.

Certain risks would still remain over the reimbursement, but it was the “character of the charity.” He also recognized that it was preferable to have France as the guarantor of the international loan, which would leave more freedom and room for maneuver. However, “since Armenians were the victims of the international order and *not* French politics, it was the LoN that was to assume the responsibility to repair the misery of this people.”<sup>477</sup>

Since the issue of the loan guarantor was slowing down the whole process, a new suggestion was received from Major Johnson. The LoN was ready to allocate 100,000 livre sterling for the further settlement of the refugees, proposing to France to create a common basket. The new proposition was undoubtedly interesting for the French authorities. As explained by Tetreau, it solved many issues at once. First, it would resolve the issue of the guarantor; second, it would give the LoN an impression of efficient cooperation; and third, it would allow the mandatory authorities to settle the refugees in profitable schemes. One last point to be clarified with the LoN was the freedom to settle other refugees as well as Armenians.<sup>478</sup> The flexibility of the LoN on both the loan and the terms of the cooperation with the French is telling. The first steps in the realization of the Syrian settlement schemes were, thus, in place.

Historian Kévonian has rightly noticed that, during the entire settlement process, which lasted for 10 years, the French never admitted the existence of any massive refugee settlement scheme in Syria. Instead, the initiative was presented as an improvement of the refugee camps or the camp sanitation, given the deplorable lack of hygiene. Similarly, any mention of the agricultural colonization would never be made, even after the realization of the scheme.<sup>479</sup> Instead, efforts were made to give more public weight and importance to the other resettlement plan – the so-called Nansen refugee settlement scheme, which had, effectively, already lost the battle against the Syrian settlement scheme. As for the Syrian scheme, it soon took another turn in the light of the new deportations from Turkey and the arrival of new Armenian refugees who settled mostly in the Syrian Jazira, on the Syrian-Turkish border. The Syrian Jazira gradually emerged as a competing settlement scheme with the Yerevan scheme. These events aroused the suspicions of Soviet Armenia about a new Armenian “national home” to a new level. Indeed, Soviet Armenia sensed an undercover plot by the imperialists against the USSR. Their fears

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<sup>477</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le médecin Principal, Dauguet, Inspecteur Général des S.D. H.& S.P. à Secrétaire général, Cabinet, Project de lettre à adresser à son Excellence le Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales “l’installation des réfugiés Arméniens en Syrie et au Liban,” 22 décembre 1927.

<sup>478</sup> CADN-SL V/575 le Haut-Commissariat de la R.F. auprès des Etats de Syrie, du Liban, des Alaouites et du Djebel Druze à le ministre des Affaires Étrangères, “L’emprunt pour l’installation des réfugiés en Syrie et au Liban,” Beyrouth, 14 novembre 1928.

<sup>479</sup> Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie*, 460.

reached a climax at the beginning of the 1930s, and the consequences will be discussed in detail in Part IV.

## **Chapter V: Syrian Jazira as a major Armenian refugee settlement site**

This chapter consists of two subchapters and aims to show how the Armenian settlements in the Syrian Jazira took a new turn at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s in the light of the third refugee exodus from Turkey to Syria. It will also demonstrate the construction of a controversial refugee settlement – Tell Brack, which was achieved as a result of close cooperation between the Armenian refugee leaders, the French military personnel stationed in the region, and the local Syrian authorities. Although the French mandatory authorities were against this settlement, it would outlive the mandate itself.

### **The new Armenian exodus (1929–1930) and the Syrian Jazira**

In May 1928, *L'Orient*, the French subsidized paper of Beirut, published successive articles by Comte de Contaut-Biron, who was visiting Syria.<sup>480</sup> The latter, devoted large paragraphs to the Upper Jazira. He spoke at length about the former prosperity of Jazira, how it was once the granary of the whole of Syria, with thousands of villages and towns, in sharp contrast to the current deplorable situation. The region had potential for the future, and the experts had calculated that, without excessive investments, it was possible to render it prosperous again. In this regard, the biggest issue to address was neither technical nor infrastructural; instead, it was the acute lack of human resources. Contaut-Biron, then, abruptly, referred to the Assyro-Chaldeans in neighboring Iraq, who had expressed a desire to settle in Jazira under French protection, but the British had objected. The Christians of Kurdistan also wished to settle there. He did not mention anything about the Armenians. He then asked several rhetorical questions. Whether the Syrian state would make small sacrifices, such as allocating lands from the huge domains of the Sultan and facilitating the first irrigation channels (which would enrich its own country and help fight against the locusts),<sup>481</sup> and encourage the immigration of Syrians and Lebanese to these vast territories? The region had abundant water and only a few villages; it

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<sup>480</sup> Comte de Contaut- Biron, “Dans le Levant Français : La question du ‘Bec de Canard’ et la Haute-Djezireh,” I, *L'Orient*, 2 mai 1928, 1-2 ; Ibid, II, 3 mai 1928, 1 ; III, 4 mai 1928, 1, IV, 5 mai 1928, 1, V, 7 mai 1928, 1; Ibid, VI, 8 mai 1929, 1.

<sup>481</sup> On locust in Jazira, see Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023); Dolbee, “The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects, and Disease in the Late Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860–1940,” (Unpublished diss. New York University, 2017).

could produce wheat, rice, and barley, but above all, it could provide the much-needed cotton.<sup>482</sup> In the second and third articles, he highlighted the importance of Hassake and its establishment thanks to the efforts of the Christians of Mardin in 1924 (again, no word about the Armenians). Finally, he mentioned the personal efforts of Captain Terrier, the chief of the intelligence service,<sup>483</sup> during the Syrian Revolt to use all kinds of pretexts to ally the tribes with the French. More often than not, the pretext had been the fight against the locust.<sup>484</sup> The fourth article was devoted to the newly established settlement of Qamishli, which already had 3,000 inhabitants. Qamishli was prospering, progressively becoming a major trade center in the region thanks to its *souks* (bazars), large streets, new stone houses, attractive cafes and dance shows, and night lighting.<sup>485</sup> The transformation of the Syrian Jazira was, indeed, underway. The acute labor shortage would soon be addressed, too. Syrian Jazira would shortly become an even more important refugee settlement site due to another Armenian exodus from Turkey and, a few years later, the arrival of Assyrians from Iraq and Kurds from Turkey.

By coincidence, the required human resources would flow to Jazira merely months after Contaut-Biron's articles appeared, as a new wave of Armenian refugees started to arrive from Turkey. This time it was Armenian peasants from the rural, overwhelmingly Kurdish-populated regions of Mamuret el-Aziz (Elazig), Bitlis, Mardin, Diyarbakir, Arabkir, Malatia, and Sivas. According to the historian Tachjian, the exodus was the outcome of Turkey's successful suppression of the Sheikh Said revolt (1925), which strengthened state control of these rural regions. The emigration happened largely due to the weakened authority of the Kurdish tribal chiefs and *aghas*, who could no longer extend their protection over these populations who had survived the genocide.<sup>486</sup>

The flow continued over the following two years, resulting in the arrival of about 8,000 to 10,000 refugees in Syria.<sup>487</sup> Strong bureaucratic pressure, extraordinarily high taxation, confiscation of properties, and other pressures were reportedly the main reasons for their exodus. Their passports were stamped "No return."<sup>488</sup> Although the Turkish authorities tried to give a voluntary character to this outflow, the French mandatory authorities concluded that the

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<sup>482</sup> Contaut-Biron, "Dans le Levant Français : La question du 'Bec de Canard', I, L'Orient, 2 mai 1928, 1-2.

<sup>483</sup> More on Terrier and his efforts see, Jordi Tejel, "The Terrier Plan and the Emergence of a Kurdish Policy Under the French Mandate in Syria, 1926–1936," *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21 (2007), 93–109.

<sup>484</sup> Contaut-Biron, "Dans le Levant Français, III, 4 mai 1928, 1.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, IV, 5 mai 1928, 1.

<sup>486</sup> Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie : aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak, 1919-1933* (Karthala : Paris, 2004), 276 ; Seda Altuğ draws the connection between the Sheikh Said revolt and this third refugee flow more directly, see in Seda Altuğ, "Armenian Genocide, Sheikh Said Revolt and Armenians in Syrian Jazira," *Armenian Weekly* (April 2010).

<sup>487</sup> For more details about this exodus, see Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 274-88, 301-317.

<sup>488</sup> CADN-SL 576, L'Arménie et les Arméniens, 32 ; Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 278.

exodus was probably part of the wider Turkish policy to get rid of all the remaining Armenian populations to solve the Armenian question forever.<sup>489</sup> The flow into Syria increased between August and December 1929, when about 1,000 persons arrived. While overall, the number of the new arrivals did not exceed 10,000 persons,<sup>490</sup> it was believed that between 30,000 and 40,000 Armenians still lived in Turkey and that all of them would eventually arrive in Syria.<sup>491</sup>

Before the arrival of these Armenians, the Syrian Jazira had already become home for many Kurdish tribes who fled Turkey after 1926.<sup>492</sup> Other than the Kurds, many Syrians and Jews had arrived from Mardin, just across the border, settling in newly founded Qamishli and its surroundings.<sup>493</sup>

As the historian Tachjian has explained, for the French mandatory authorities, who were mainly preoccupied with the colonization of the Syrian Jazira, all the newcomers were welcome, especially if they met two preconditions; being a Christian and being a peasant.<sup>494</sup> Most of the Armenians who arrived at the end of the 1920s were both. The French authorities were directly involved in settling these refugees in the Jazira region, expressing their willingness to allocate lands between Qaramaniye and Hassake, about 40–50 km from the border. French efforts were facilitated because the new refugees, mostly Kurdish-speaking peasants, preferred to settle in the countryside. It was said that they believed they would return to their homes one day. Notably, the Armenian refugee leaders of Aleppo, including Dr. Altunian, preferred another location for their settlement, the sanjak of Alexandretta, but this proposal was rejected by the refugees.

In choosing to be settled in Jazira, the refugees unwittingly assisted the French agenda and fitted nicely into the Jazira settlement scheme for which practical efforts were already underway and financial commitments in place. On December 2, 1929, an important meeting was convened in Geneva at the ILO.<sup>495</sup> The aim of this meeting was twofold: to present the progress on

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<sup>489</sup> CADN-SL 575, le Chef de Bataillon Couvert, chef du S.R. Du Vilayet d'Alep à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. Du Levant, "Immigration arménienne," Alep, 6 Janvier 1930.

<sup>490</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le délégué- Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour le mohafez d'Alep à Monsieur Gabriel Puaux, Haut-Commissaire de la République Française en Syrie et au Liban, "Installation des réfugiés arméniens à Alep," Alep, 6 Juillet 1940.

<sup>491</sup> This figure was given according to the British estimates, see in Public Records, Foreign Office (hereafter FO), 371/13827, Pol. Eastern -Turkey, 1929, "Memorandum," George W. Rendel, responsible for the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, November 9, 1929, 73-76, cited in Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 278.

<sup>492</sup> Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 148; For the Kurdish settlements see Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde*.

<sup>493</sup> Tachjian, *France en Cilicie*, 324.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid, 325.

<sup>495</sup> Those present were M. Thiebaut, the representative of the French Red Cross, Mr. Le Nail, the representative of the French government, B. Golden from the association of Save the Children Fund, E. Clouzot, from the ICRC, L. Pashalian, from the Armenian Central Refugee Committee, and Major Johnson from the High Commissionaire's Office of the Refugees.

refugee settlement so far and discuss strategies to cope with the new refugee flow, which intensified during the second part of 1929. After Major Johnson had briefed the delegates about the construction of two villages in the Alawite region, three neighborhoods in Beirut and another one in Damascus, as well as the Hayashen, Abdel Hayek, and Soug Su villages in Alexandretta, the delegates then discussed the future budget, including the 3 million francs recently allocated by the French government. In total, 60,000 Syrian lira were needed to accomplish all the projects adopted since early 1927. As the budget and the French allocation were being discussed, Le Nail, the French official representative before the LoN responsible for the settlement of the refugees in Syria, was invited to shed light on the future French refugee settlement plans that were disproportionately concentrated on the Upper Jazira.

Le Nail first thanked the delegates for their continuous efforts in supporting the Armenian refugees. He then declared that the French government also expected them to undertake a much larger settlement scheme. French authorities wished to settle the new refugees with their civil and religious chiefs, not only giving them land and houses but also aiming to restore their churches, schools, local administration, hospitals... “This program requires time, money, and sacrifices and merits the attention of the Armenian nation and its friends.” He then highlighted that the recent French allocation of 3 million francs was done on the understanding that more funds were forthcoming. First, he demanded the promised 336,000 francs previously collected for the Yerevan scheme and later allocated to Syria. Since this money had been promised to the French High Commissioner some time ago, Ponsot had made several pledges; thus, the money should be transferred to Beirut urgently. Le Nail also urged the delegates to appeal to the governments of Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Norway, and Romania to transfer the sums pledged to the Yerevan settlement scheme for the Armenian refugees in Syria instead. The British and American philanthropic organizations would also be appealed to.

Once his demands were satisfied, he revealed more details about the French Jazira plan. The territory in question was the most fertile plain in Syria, consisting of 4 million hectares, of which only about 0.5 million hectares were cultivated. In addition to agriculture and cattle raising, these lands could be utilized for cotton growing, as well as sheep rearing for the wool trade. Le Nail had already discussed this question with representatives of the industries in France that had expressed their readiness to provide every assistance to the Armenian refugees. Moreover, Hassake was to be the new administrative center for the whole region. He claimed that as many as 100,000 refugees could be settled in the area, and Aleppo would become the principal market for the refugees’ produce. This would revive the commercial prosperity of Aleppo, which would ensure Syrian support for the scheme. Moreover, he revealed that the

mandatory power planned to build new railways and roads to connect with the Euphrates valley. As for security, he proposed to settle Armenians at least 100 km from the Turkish border, toward the Iraqi border, where they would be in touch with the nomadic tribes with whom the French had “the friendliest relations.” Le Nail sought to re-emphasize the urgency for approval of this new scheme, given the fresh refugee flow. He anticipated that as many as 40,000 new refugees were to arrive from Turkey shortly. He concluded by saying that “Armenians will find a ‘*Home from Home*’ in that part of the world, which is so closely connected with their own history.”<sup>496</sup>

Significantly, this meeting was taking place at the time (December 1929) when the recent exodus of the Armenians was at its height. Le Nail thought that British Phil-Armenian agencies should be asked for additional funds “without mentioning that the new arrivals would be included in the settlement” to avoid revealing that preparations had been made well in advance in anticipation of the new arrivals. At that point, Golden, the Director of Save the Children Fund, asked for clarification as to which individuals would be prioritized – the newcomers or those who had been in the refugee camps for the last six or seven years. Le Nail suggested constructing a model village in Jazira where the *best elements from both new and old refugees* were to be housed.<sup>497</sup> Indeed, there was no lack of refugees in need of homes. There were still 30,000 refugees in the camps of Syria and Lebanon waiting to be settled,<sup>498</sup> while thousands of others were expected.

This meeting, its timing (early December 1929), and especially the discussions were interesting for multiple reasons. Le Nail not only revealed the widescale French colonization project in the Syrian Jazira, for which he openly anticipated support from the LoN and the other international donors, he openly referred to it as a “home for the Armenians.” More or less accurate figures were given as to how many Armenians still lived in Turkey and how many were expected. Pashalian, the representative of the Armenian Central Refugee Committee before the LoN, in his turn, revealed that all the Armenian organizations had already agreed on the Jazira settlement plan, hinting that not only had such talks taken place internally, but most probably there had also been discussions with the French mandatory authorities.

With this background, it was understandable that the mandatory authorities gave the newcomers every assistance to help them settle down permanently. In Qamishli, the lands were

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<sup>496</sup> CADN-SL 575, Confidential note, Advisory Committee for Refugees. Meeting of the Armenian Central Committee of Refugees held at the International Labor Office, Geneva, December 2, 1929.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> CADN-SL 2387, Confidential, High Commissioner for the refugees, The report of Mr. Le Nail on the resettlement of Armenian refugees in Syria, Session August 26, 1930.

allocated below market prices, while in Hassake, they were free of charge.<sup>499</sup> In August 1928, Poincaré, the President of the French Council, had openly declared that the settlement of the Armenian refugees along the Syrian-Turkish border had important political implications before being a humanitarian action. “We are striving to settle these refugees mainly along the Syrian-Turkish border. By doing so, not only would the interests of these Christian populations always be with the French mandate, but they would separate Muslim Arabs from the Muslim Turks and would also be ready to fight and protect themselves considering the past.”<sup>500</sup>

The French authorities knew that the Syrians had started to complain about the Armenian refugees after the rent prices skyrocketed and wages dropped because of the abundant cheap labor. That is why the settlement of the Armenians was mainly conducted quietly in rural places where labor was needed so as not to provoke the anger of the local Muslims.<sup>501</sup> In the Syrian Jazira, refugee settlements were to be established after satisfying the demands of the local tribes. The French delegate explained that it was necessary to avoid creating jealousy and rivalry between the communities that could result in the new settlers suffering attacks, robbery, and killings.

The French authorities were convinced that their organizational and financial efforts would be quickly repaid.<sup>502</sup> In this case, even the settlement costs were to be covered by the Armenian community of Aleppo. In fact, the French authorities did not hurry to uncover their settlement plans to the Armenian leaders, instead making clear to them that they did not oppose the arrival and the settlement of these refugees if their costs were entirely paid for. The Armenian notables of Aleppo, representing all three religious communities, had given the necessary assurances.<sup>503</sup>

While the French authorities believed they had the upper hand in the Jazira settlement scheme, which was happening under their supervision, the reality on the ground soon proved otherwise. Before long, the direct cooperation initiated by the Armenian refugee leaders with the local Syrian authorities, as well as the local French military personnel, largely bypassed the oversight of the High Commissioner. Some rural settlements, such as Tell Brack, for example, were created against the High Commissioner’s wishes and recommendations, as shown below.

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<sup>499</sup> Tachjian, *France en Cilicie*, 325.

<sup>500</sup> MAE, vol. 21 #197-198, *Armenie*, Lettre de Poincaré au service français de la SDN, 11 août 1928.

<sup>501</sup> CADN-SL 575, le Chef de Bataillon Couvert, chef du S.R. Du Vilayet d’Alep à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. Du Levant, “Immigration arménienne,” Alep, 6 Janvier 1930.

<sup>502</sup> CADN-SL 575, De Lavastre, le délégué-adjoint p.i. du Haut-Commissaire pour le vilayet d’Alep à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire de la R.F., Alep, 12 décembre 1929.

<sup>503</sup> CADN-SL 575, le Chef de Bataillon Couvert, chef du S.R. Du Vilayet d’Alep à Monsieur le directeur du S.R. Du Levant, “Immigration arménienne,” Alep, 6 Janvier 1930.



Moreover, these settlements, including Tell Brack, thrived and prospered, somehow overcoming all the difficulties created for them by the French authorities, as we shall see later.

Within a short period, 21–22 Armenian villages mushroomed on the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi border.<sup>504</sup> The new settlements, in their turn, attracted many artisans and merchants from Aleppo, who settled there, too. By the end of the 1930s, the new settlers comprising Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians, numbered about 150,000 persons.<sup>505</sup>

### **The “false start,” the creation of Tell Brack**

On December 12, 1929, a Refugee Support Central Committee was formed in Aleppo by the local Armenian notables under the auspices of the Armenian Catholicos, Sahak II, to cope with the new refugee flow.

According to the Committee’s activity report, 800 Armenian families (or 5,000 persons) arrived between December 1929 and July 1930.<sup>506</sup> The main task of the Committee was to provide medical assistance, food, and shelter to the refugees so that they did not become a burden on the local or French authorities. It was this Committee that pleaded to the other Armenian philanthropic organizations for financial support.<sup>507</sup> The refugees, in their turn, promised to pay back the settlement costs as soon as possible. They also placed considerable faith in their community in Syria and pledged to be useful to them. *Yeprat*, in its turn, called on the local Armenian community not to consider the newly arrived refugees lesser Armenians because of their language. After all, few among the Aleppo refugees could speak Armenian, the difference being that the newcomers spoke Kurdish instead of Turkish.<sup>508</sup>

The Committee was headed by Dr. Altunian and Pastor Shirajian, two Protestants who enjoyed great popularity among the Armenians.<sup>509</sup> The French had suspected both of them of

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<sup>504</sup> Ani Fishenkjian, “Qamishlii Hay Hamaynke ev Jazire-I Hayotc Arajnordakan Pokhanorduteune, 1920-1960,” [Armenian Community of Qamishly and the Armenian Vicarage in Jazira, 1920-1960] in *Armenians in Syria*, ed. Antranik Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018), 415 – 432, 421.

<sup>505</sup> CADN-SL 1367, “Repatriation de la population de la Haute Djézireh,” Beirut, April 1939, cited in Tejel, “Terrier plan”.

<sup>506</sup> Archives of Central Refugee Committee, Nubar Library. Out of them 600 families lived in Qamishli while only 200 in Aleppo. Report of the Central Refugee Council, from December 1929 to September 1932, Aleppo, 1932.

<sup>507</sup> “Gaghtakants Kendronakan Khnamatarutyun Gortsuneutyune” [The Activities of the Central Refugee Commiee], *Yeprat*, August 27, 1930, 3.

<sup>508</sup> Divan, Endhanur Tenorinutyun, “H.B.E. Miutyun Kyanke u Gortse,” [The Activities of the AGBU], *Yeprat*, February 1, 1930, 2.

<sup>509</sup> Other members of Aleppo branch were Mihran Byzandian, Dr. Khachik Poghosian, Sargis Selian, Mihran Herardian and Mihran Pasmajian, see in Jakob Cholakian, *Surihay Deprotsi Patmutyun* [The History of Armenian Schools in Syria], vol. 1 (Yerevan 2021), 61. Historian Jakob Cholakian possesses the archives of this Refugee Committee. The general board members were Altunian, Gabriel Gasparian, Mazlumian (from Baron hotel), Azirian and Dr. Ter-Ghazarian, see in *Husharar* (the organ of AGBU), N:143, February 1930.

pro-British sympathy for some time. In order to secure the required funds, Altunian and Shirajian mobilized their personal contacts in Syria and abroad. It was decided to first appeal to the Phil-Armenian organizations abroad, which had previously provided relief to the Armenian refugees during the Armenian Genocide and beyond.<sup>510</sup>

As it happened, most of these contacts were British or American missionaries or Phil-Armenian organizations with Protestant backgrounds. One of the first people to whom Altunian turned for support was his friend, the British pastor of Cyprus, Harold Buxton.<sup>511</sup> Buxton's reply arrived quickly, promising support.<sup>512</sup> In Aleppo, the Committee was aided greatly in its efforts by the British Friends of Armenia and especially its representative Miss Roberts.

Altunian was not the only person who had to beg the British for support. Pashalian, in his turn, called on the Friends of Armenia and Save the Children Fund. Both organizations had been active in providing relief to the Armenian refugees previously. On December 5, 1929, Pashalian's request to the British authorities was discussed at the Foreign Office in London. In this case, the request was for political rather than financial assistance. He asked for unofficial British support to pressure Ankara to slow down the deportation allowing more time to gather resources to settle the refugees. At that point, it was believed that up to 40,000 refugees would arrive. The Foreign Office, for its part, was against any interference with Turkey, arguing that it could endanger the Armenians still in Turkey and harm Britain's good relations with Turkey. Furthermore, the destination country, Syria, was under the French and not the British mandate, and thus it was appropriate for the French authorities to deal with it.<sup>513</sup>

Interestingly, Pashalian had appealed to the British rather than to the French to deal with the new exodus. Most probably, this was because the Syrian-Iraqi border was not delimited yet, and the Armenian elite believed the British position was stronger than that of the French in these areas.<sup>514</sup> In fact, during the Geneva meeting of December 2, 1929, the delegates had discussed whether there was a need to approach Turkey "to regulate the exodus in the same manner as had been arranged in favor of the Russian refugees in Istanbul" either officially or unofficially. This was suggested by the ICRC's delegate. However, it was Pashalian who had advised against such intervention, fearing that it would increase the flow and place the French

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<sup>510</sup> See in Ani Fishenkian, "Suriakan Jaziren ev Noragaght Hayere: Tell Brak" [Syrian Jazira and the Newly Arrived Armenians: Tell Brack], *Ejmiatsin*, 4 (2020), 92-116, 99.

<sup>511</sup> FO 371/13827 cited in Zaven Messerlian, "Turkio Nerkin Gavarneru Hayots Partadir Artagaghte" [The Forced Armenian Emigration from the Internal Regions of Turkey], *Haykazian Hayagitakan Handes*, N: 3 (Beirut, 1972), 101-119, 112.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>514</sup> On the delimitation of the Syrian-Iraqi border, see Tejel, "Borders from Below."

Government in a difficult situation.<sup>515</sup> Why did he object to an approach to Turkey? Why did he think that the British intervention would give better results? It remains unclear.

At the same time, the arrival of so many Armenian refugees in the Syrian-Iraqi borderland was also closely monitored by the British authorities. The British consul in Aleppo sent detailed weekly reports to the Foreign Office about the number of the refugees, their departure towns and villages they came from and their conditions.<sup>516</sup> In the beginning, the British actions were limited to publishing articles and launching fundraising campaigns.<sup>517</sup> Significantly, the bulk of the budget collected by the Armenian Refugee Support Committee came from external donations, mostly from British philanthropic sources.<sup>518</sup>

Urgent appeals were also made to the entire Armenian diaspora. The AGBU was the first to respond, with Gulbenkian pledging 50,000 francs for the settlement. The appeal also received a positive response from the ARF, whose Cairo organ *Husaber* collected 215 British sterling.<sup>519</sup> Other major donors were Miss Roberts and Dr. Altunian.

One of the first actions of the Refugee Support Committee was to send a fact-finding mission to the Syrian Jazira. The composition of this delegation was interesting. It was composed of Pastor Shirajian (the head), Dr. Pasmajian, Misak Melkonian (an agrarian specialist), Miss Bulle (a Danish missionary in Aleppo), Miss Roberts, and Miss Himans (a Dutch traveler).<sup>520</sup> Here, too, Jeppe's role was instrumental because Dr. Pasmajian was the doctor who worked in her rural colonies, and Misak, her adopted son, was the founder of the first model villages in Jazira.

Moreover, all three foreign ladies who accompanied the delegation were Protestants, and one was also British. The delegation visited the French authorities in Aleppo before heading to Jazira and asked for the allocation of "a fertile and secure parcel of land" for the settlement

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<sup>515</sup> CADN-SL 575 Confidential note, Advisory Committee for Refugees. Meeting of the Armenian Central Committee of Refugees held at the International Labor Office, Geneva, December 2, 1929.

<sup>516</sup> FO 371/13827 from British consul in Aleppo Monc-Mayson to Sir A. Henderson, Report N:79, secret, 14 November 1929 cited in Zaven Messerlian, "Turkio Nerkin Gavarneru Hayots Partadir Artagaghte," 108.

<sup>517</sup> FO 371/14567, cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> 380,817 Turkish gold liras were donated by the Armenian AGBU, 83,775 from Miss Roberts, 2,810 from Buxton, 19,879 from Friends of Armenia, in total 625,757 Ottoman gold liras were collected, see in *Teghekagir ev Hashvekshir Gaghtakanan Khnamatarakan Kendronakan Handzakhmbi* (dektember 1929- September 1932) [The report of the Refugee Support Committee, December 1929-September 1932] (Aleppo: Ter Sahakian, 1932), Annex 1, 30.

<sup>519</sup> For more details, see *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>520</sup> Ani Fishenkian, "Suriakan Jaziren ev Noragaght Hayere," 102.

of the refugees.<sup>521</sup> Four potential settlement sites were initially chosen based on the climate, availability of water and other conditions.<sup>522</sup>

The delegation arrived in Jazira and, on the advice of the local Arab authorities and the French military personnel in Hassake, the site of Tell Brack was chosen. It was located close to the Jaghjagh river, strategically located between Hassake (70 km) and Qamishli (80 km), the two major towns of the region, and 600 km away from Aleppo. The site had been a “gateway city” on the crossroads of major trade routes connecting Levant, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia since ancient times.<sup>523</sup> Little had changed since then; the bridge on the outskirts of the village connected Syrian Jazira with Mosul (Iraq) and Merdin (Turkey). All travelers passed through the village.<sup>524</sup> The site was almost equally far from the Turkish and the Iraqi borders. One cannot help but ask why this strategic location was suggested by the locals and the French military for refugee settlement.

The answer to this question is found in the memoirs of one of the Tell Brack settlers, Hakob Jeghelian. He explained that when the Armenian National Union of Aleppo had asked the Arab governor of Aleppo for permission to construct an Armenian village in the Upper Jazira, the government agreed immediately. Such a settlement overlapped with their plans to encourage the nomadic tribes in the region to sedentize.<sup>525</sup> It was agreed in advance that the new settlers were to be cultivators, which is why the lands provided to them were located close to the river Jaghjagh to solve the irrigation issue. The Jaghjagh had abundant water during the winter months, and enough water remained during the summer in the deep ditches surrounding the area. Because of this characteristic, the site was famous among the Arab tribes who camped there around the year.<sup>526</sup> The site offered another advantage, too; it was located between the two largest towns of Jazira. All these factors had influenced the decision that it should be a refugee hosting site despite (or thanks to) its strategic location. It is noteworthy that the agreement was reached between the Armenian leaders and the local Syrian authorities, first in Aleppo, then in Jazira. In Jazira, the agreement was also approved by the French military personnel stationed there, who had done so without necessarily consulting Beirut.

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>522</sup> These sites were Tell Ali Efendi in the North of Hassake; Shaker Pazar in Tepe; Tell Brack in the South of Qamishli, and Qarana close to Jabal Sinjar.

<sup>523</sup> Not surprisingly, its modern history is rather connected with archeological excavations, and the development of aerial photography. The main tell was first excavated in 1937-38 by Max Mallowan, the husband of Agatha Christie. The description of the work is included in Agatha Christie, *Come Tell Me How You Live: Memories from Archaeological Expeditions in the Mysterious Middle East* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2015).

<sup>524</sup> Hakob Jeghelian, *Stverum Mnacac Kyank* [A Life Left in Shadow] (Yerevan, Hayastan, 1991), 34.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid, 31.

Afterward, no time was wasted, the tents were quickly pitched, and construction of the houses started right away under the leadership of Shirajian. During the inaugural ceremony of the village in February 1930, the Governor of Jazira, many French military personnel, and local *mukhtars* (heads of the villages) were present.<sup>527</sup> However, this smooth phase did not last; the first troubles started merely months after the inauguration. In May 1930, the village was honored by a visit of a high-ranking French delegation headed by none other than Le Nail. Surprisingly, the outcome of this visit was devastating for the settlement because the delegation found that the village did not respect the 50 km security zone previously agreed between the French and Turkish authorities, according to which Armenian and Kurdish “undesirables” had to be settled at least 50 km from the border.<sup>528</sup> This meant that the village had to be pushed further away from the border by 7–8 km.<sup>529</sup> The appeals of the refugees and their leaders that houses were already half-built and fields cultivated were in vain. The refugees reminded the French authorities that the site had been chosen and proposed by the local French military men in agreement with the local authorities. Nothing helped; the French were not only unmoved, but they also openly accused Miss Roberts of being a troublemaker who spread British propaganda in the region.<sup>530</sup> Roberts was soon expelled from Jazira. The new settlers had to give in and move further, leaving behind half-constructed houses and dug wells. They had to start all over again, and the disappointment and despair were widespread.<sup>531</sup> This notwithstanding, the two villages of Sahakashen and Mesrophasen were quickly constructed on hills a few kilometers away.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Shirajian, Report of the Refugee Support Committee, 14-15, cited in H. Cholakian, “Pastataghter Jazirei Sherjani Hay Gaghtakanutyan ev Tel Praki Kov Sahakashen ev Mesopashen Gyugheru Hastatman Masin: Gaghtakanatc Teghavorman Handznakhmbi Tghtatsrar, 1930” [Documents on the Settlement of the Armenian Refugees in Jazira, the Creation of Sahakashen and Mesropashen in Tell Brack: From the Files of Refugee Committee, 1930], *Haykazian Hayagitakan Handes*, N:41 (2021, Beirut), 677-713.

<sup>528</sup> Document 15 “Tell Beri, Tell Brak and the Required Security Zone,” in A. Fishenkjian, “Suriakan Jaziren ev Noragaght Hayere,” 104. More on the security zone, Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, 358-364.

<sup>529</sup> *Teghekagir ev Hashvekshir Gaghtakanan*, 14.

<sup>530</sup> CADN-SL 575, Surete Aleppo, Info 694, April 17, 1930.

<sup>531</sup> Shirajian, Document N: 15 cited in Ani, Fishenkjian, “Suriayah Jaziren ev Noragaght Hayere (Tel Prag),” *Edjmiatsin*, N: 4 (2020), 92-116, 104.

<sup>532</sup> Details about the villages, people, fields, animals, see in *Teghekagir ev Hashvekshir Gaghtakanan*, 17.



Figure 13. The location of Tell Brak. Source: Wikipedia.

In the meantime, the benefits of settling refugees in this region were soon apparent. Hassake, a small village before the arrival of the refugees, now looked like a town, while Tell Brak had inspired many tribes to settle down either partially or fully. Poidebard pleaded for more support for this settlement from Beirut since it was a good example of how the desert could be turned into a flourishing village.<sup>533</sup> Interestingly, Burnier agreed with him. He only regretted that the Armenians did not choose the Khabur River, which had running water all the year, instead of the Jaghjagh. He was equally enthusiastic about the new behavior of the tribes who followed the refugees' example by starting cultivation.<sup>534</sup> Burnier's enthusiasm for the settlement would soon vanish, as we shall see later.

New misfortunes befell Tell Brak shortly afterward. The whole region was hit by an unusual drought and a plague of locusts in the first year of the harvest.<sup>535</sup> The drought, the worst for 40–50 years, was even harsher the next year.<sup>536</sup> For three successive years there would be no harvest. There was an urgent need to construct a dam on the banks of the Jaghjagh to irrigate the fields, without which no harvest would be possible, and the village would have no future. It was believed that by irrigating the fields only once, in March, it would be possible to increase the harvest 10 times.<sup>537</sup> The construction costs were calculated to be between 1,500 and 2,000 Ottoman gold (or 160,000 French francs), a huge amount of money that the Armenian

<sup>533</sup> CADN-SL 576 Proce-Verbal, la reunion du 15 décembre 1930 du comité central de secours aux refugies, 15 décembre 1930. (Presents: Helleu, Jude, Peugh, Poidebard, Melkonian, Burnier, Chatenay, Médecin Com. Lubet).

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> More on the drought and its implications for the tribes of the region, see Dolbee, *Locusts of Power*; Dolbee, "The Locust and the Starling; Laura Stocker, "The "Camel Dispute": Cross-border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929-1934," in *Regimes of Mobility*, 319–350.

<sup>536</sup> The Report of the Refugee Support Committee, 22; "Sahmanin Nor Gyugherun Vijake," [Conditions of the New Villages on the Borderlands], *Yeprad*, May 21, 1932, 4.

<sup>537</sup> Hakob Jeghelian, *Siverum Mnacac Kyank*, 48.

Committee did not possess.<sup>538</sup> The proposed solution was to start the construction of the dam with the help of a local expert, which required less money. After the laborers had worked day and night for a month, the dam stood ready with the expectation that it would survive for at least 7–8 years; instead, it lasted only a couple of months.<sup>539</sup>

The new settlers, demoralized and helpless, started to leave the village one by one. The Support Committee and its influential members, especially the Altunians, father and son, who were both trained in the USA and Great Britain and owned the first modern hospital in Aleppo, started a vigorous campaign in Syria and abroad to secure funds. An appeal was sent immediately to Burnier in May 1932. According to Dr. Altunian junior, it was believed that he would be sympathetic to this cause “since he had himself assisted at the foundation of the village” that was constructed in a way that respected the 50 km security zone.<sup>540</sup> When no reply was received, the Armenian Committee decided to forward their plea directly to Geneva.

Dr. Altunian then visited Damascus and Qamishli to meet the French and local authorities. His father begged for help from the Nansen Refugee Office as well as the ILO, which was now headed by one of his old acquaintances, Major Johnson. A few months later, when he was heading to London on a private journey, he detoured to Geneva to meet Johnson in person. These intensive campaigns quickly bore results; soon, Burnier was instructed by Geneva to visit Tell Brack in person and do everything possible to find a solution.

Burnier arrived in Qamishli in May 1932, accompanied by Le Nail, and visited Tell Brack. He testified that, indeed, a few thousand refugees were struggling to survive in the harshest living conditions: economic crises, lack of water, drought, and plagues of locusts. He concluded that between 1,500 to 2,000 Ottoman gold were needed for the construction of a solid dam.<sup>541</sup> In his report to Geneva, he emphasized the technical difficulties. It would cost too much money, it would cause floods at a time when the fields had enough water, and the river dried up for six months during the summer.<sup>542</sup>

In the autumn of the same year (1932), a special session was convened at the Nansen Office to discuss the matter. During this session, both Burnier and Le Nail made it clear that

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<sup>538</sup> *Teghegagir ev Hashvekshir Gaghtakanan*, 24.

<sup>539</sup> Ani Fishenkjian, “Suriakan Jaziren ev Noragaght Hayere,” 110.

<sup>540</sup> Archives of the Armenian Central Refugee Committee, Nubar Library of Paris, Fond Haute-Djezira, file *Évacuation du Sandjak (Alexandretta) 1929-1933*. E.H.R. Altunian, “Memorandum on Tell Brak submitted to the Nansen Office Committee meeting of October 25, 1933,” Aleppo, October 1, 1933.

<sup>541</sup> *Teghegagir ev Hashvekshir Gaghtakanan*, 24.

<sup>542</sup> Archives of the Armenian Central Refugee Committee, Nubar Library, fond Haute-Djezira, file *Évacuation du Sandjak (Alexandretta), 1929-1933*. Le représentant de l’Office international Nansen pour les réfugiés à monsieur le secrétaire général de l’OINR, Beyrouth, 20 mai 1932.

this settlement should not be supported because of political concerns.<sup>543</sup> Dr. Altunian, too, knew that the issue had a political character but did not suspect that the main issue was his alleged pro-British sentiments and British connections. Meanwhile, as explained by Altunian, both the local Syrians and the French military encouraged the Armenian Committee to continue with the scheme.<sup>544</sup> When, at the beginning of 1933, Werner, the President of the Nansen Refugee Office, visited Aleppo, he found out to his great surprise that Tell Brak still existed. He immediately promised to procure 400 sterling to add to the funds already collected by the Friends of Armenia and The Lord Mayor's fund (both British) if *no politics* intervened. These funds were judged to be enough to solve the irrigation issue. Paradoxically, the French refusal of support pushed the Armenians to seek help from the British, the threat of British involvement being the reason the French refused to support the village in the first place.

Meanwhile, the local government showed sympathy and support for the new settlement by granting official water rights on the Jaghjagh river, while the Governor of Deir ez-Zor himself secured official title deeds for the new settlers; notably, the deeds could only be claimed after three years' continuous cultivation.<sup>545</sup> Despite all these efforts, the news arrived in Aleppo that the French High Commissioner had not changed his mind, and no support was forthcoming.<sup>546</sup>

In vain, the Armenian leaders tried to make sense of this absurd French opposition. After all, the same French authorities had chosen the site and encouraged the refugees to settle. The construction and the cultivation were done entirely by the refugees' own means, and over 1 million francs had already been spent.<sup>547</sup> Moreover, the site respected the 50-km security zone. Through constant references to the security zone, it was clear that for the Armenian leaders, the problematic border was the Turkish one, whereas, for the French, it was the other – the Iraqi border. They were given four main official reasons: the unsuitable location of the village; the fact it was too close to the borderlands; the need for investment being greater than the income, and the availability of other, better settlement sites.<sup>548</sup> However, the real reason was explained in a secret note penned by none other than Burnier and held in the Nantes archives. "Tell Brak was created in 1930 and financed by the British to host Armenian refugees from Turkey.

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<sup>543</sup> Altunian, "Memorandum on Tell Brak."

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> The whole communication between Altunian, the International Nansen Office for the Refugees, and the French authorities can be found in CADN, SL//1/V/575.

<sup>547</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le délégué-adjoint pour le vilayet d'Alep à monsieur le Haut-Commissaire, 9 mai 1933.

<sup>548</sup> Archives of Central Refugee Committee, Nubar Library. Letter from Assistance aux réfugiés Arméniens, comité central to Pashalian, Aleppo, August 24, 1933.



Altunian asks for 100,000 francs to build a dam, which will make the village prosperous.” Burnier also complained that the site was constructed by the Protestants, saying that both Altunian and Shirajian<sup>549</sup> had considerable influence over the Armenians in Aleppo. He also stated that the site’s location close to British-controlled Iraq makes it “*likely to serve as a basis for intrigues in connection with Iraq (English side). In my opinion, therefore, the case does not present any interest for the High Commission.*”<sup>550</sup> It is highly significant that the representative of the international organizations responsible for overseeing the refugee settlement had become an important ally for the mandatory authorities, even pointing out to the French what was best for their interests.

Although no dam was ever constructed in Tell Brack, the village survived against all odds. It was only abandoned for a short period between mid-1932 and 1934 and was revived again with the arrival of new Armenian settlers.<sup>551</sup> In 1939, more than 30 Armenian families arrived in Tell Brack after the evacuation of Alexandretta. The Committee spent a total of 8,000 Ottoman gold on this settlement.

Tell Brack was, effectively, a special place, an in-between place, strategically located on the borderlands of two imperial powers. While there is no evidence that the British mandatory authorities sought to use these refugees for their purposes (to spread British propaganda or discredit the French), the fact that there was a Protestant connection between the leaders of the refugees and the philanthropic organizations that furnished financial support to the settlement, was enough evidence for the French for British intrigues – real or imaginary. The remarkable success of the settlement, on the other hand, was due to close cooperation between the refugees, their leaders, and the local Arab authorities, much to the annoyance of the French authorities in Beirut.

However, despite the effective cooperation of the Armenian refugee leaders with the Syrian local authorities to create rural colonies in the Syrian Jazira, sometimes against the plans of the French authorities, most scholarly works on Syria during the interwar years depict the Armenian refugees as the French “colons.” A non-Muslim, non-Arabic speaking community that remained distant from the Syrians and was soon caught in a political and social “no man’s

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<sup>549</sup> Aharon Shirajian, head of the Armenian Protestant church in Aleppo, was considered an American agent by the French for his connections with the American Red Cross. CADN-SL 575, Sûreté generale, N:2595, 1 juin 1932.

<sup>550</sup> [Il est susceptible de servir de base à des intrigues en liaison avec l’Irak (côté anglais), a mon avis donc, l’affaire ne present pour le Haut Commissariat aucun intérêt], (Highlighted in the original). CADN-SL 575, Haut-Commissaire Martel, 7 décembre 1933; CADN- SL 575, Confid., le Haut-Commissaire à le conseiller adjoint pour le vilayet d’Alep, “Tell Brack,” 17 mai 1933. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>551</sup> During this period, the Refugee Committee paid all the expenses for 10 peasants to remain in the village and safeguard it in the anticipation that the inhabitants were to return as soon as the conditions allowed.

land.”<sup>552</sup> In these works, it was claimed that the Armenians were foisted on reluctant Syrians, who viewed their presence as a sectarian, political, and economic threat. Such works overwhelmingly base their observations on the Syrian nationalist discourse and the Syrian nationalist press of Damascus, in particular.<sup>553</sup>

It is true that the use of populations deemed loyal as tools to extend influence over borderlands was previously practiced by the British (Assyrians in Iraq and Jews in Palestine).<sup>554</sup> The Armenian settlement in the Syrian Jazira has until now been regarded through the same lens. Yet, the participation of the local authorities, including the governors of Aleppo, the *mutasarif* of Deir ez-Zor, as well as the *mukhtars* and *mudirs* (head of villages), in the selection of the site, the local leaders’ economic plans that revolved around the refugees, as well as the direct negotiations between the refugee leaders and the local authorities, are important signs that the Jazira settlement was not purely a colonial endeavor. This project was different because it clearly demonstrated the agency of the refugees. The latter, far from being “classical” or passive colons in the hands of the French mandatory authorities, settled on the random sites chosen for them. In this instance, as was previously the case with the model village of Tell Samen, refugee leaders were actively involved in negotiations with the local authorities. This explains why, unlike in Palestine, there were no violent land disputes between the locals and the new settlers. Instead, these settlements successfully survived and thrived in post-mandate Syria. In fact, Tell Brack demonstrates clearly how cooperation between the local Arab authorities and the refugee leaders enabled the settlement to survive.

How can we explain the many contradictions of this case? Did the Syrian nationalists not know about the cooperation and the close contact between the Armenians and the Syrian local authorities in Aleppo and Jazira? Why and how did the few Armenian rural settlements of Jazira come to be viewed as an Armenian-French conspiracy to establish an Armenian “national home” in Syria? Why were parallels drawn between the Armenian settlement and the Jewish one in neighboring Palestine? The story of the “Armenian home,” its origins, and its many layers will be discussed in Part IV.

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<sup>552</sup> Keith Watenpaugh, “Towards a New Category of Colonial Theory: Colonial Cooperation and the Survivors’ Bargain: The Case of the Post-Genocide Armenian Community of Syria under French Mandate” in *The British and French*, ed. Peter Sluglett et al., 597-622, 601.

<sup>553</sup> S. Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land, and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939),” (Unpublished diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 220; Altuğ, “Syrian-Armenian Memory and the Refugee Issue in Syria under the French Mandate, 1921-1946,” *The Armenian Weekly*, July 5, 2012; Altuğ, “Making of Refugee-ness and Armenians in French Syria (1915–1939): Religion, Land, History,” in *Armenians in Syria*, ed. Antranik Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018); Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-1939,” *Past and Present*, N:235 (2017), 141-178,

<sup>554</sup> Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2017).

## Conclusions

Part III aimed to reveal the Armenian participation in the “Great Syrian Revolt.” Since the outbreak of the Revolt and Moscow’s efforts to create communist cells in the Middle East coincided, and since Armenians were a majority in these cells, at least at the beginning, we chose to tell the story of the Revolt and the creation of the Communist Party in Syria and Lebanon together. By doing so, we also had another aim, to show that, in certain structures, namely the Communist Party, Armenians, and Syrians (as well as the Lebanese) cooperated closely. We also aimed to show how adherence to the Communist party had little to do with communist ideology and the praxis among the Armenians and Syrians and how both groups did so out of nationalistic concerns. The Soviet influence in Syria made Armenian internal divisions even sharper.

An entire chapter is devoted to the Armenian participation in the Revolt, using a new corpus of literature. We discovered that the two opposing Armenian blocs had established contacts with the rebels and achieved secret agreements. While the Communists had publicly and openly sided with the rebels, the ARF had pledged their strict neutrality. This notwithstanding, one of the Armenian refugee camps in Damascus was attacked and looted on the same day (October 18, 1925) as the rebels had entered Damascus and the city was bombarded by the French forces. Later the attack was blamed on the presence of the Armenian armed forces in the French military units who were tasked with suppressing the Revolt. We have shown that the incident resulted from a spontaneous riot rather than an organized attack. We have also demonstrated that another major disturbance in Damascus that had occurred months later (in February 1926) had largely served as the basis to claim that the attack had happened because of the Armenian armed bands. In fact, the February events and the major anti-Armenian discourse happened well after the camp incident, and it was *after* the camp incident that many young Armenian men began to be recruited into the French military units. Thus, the camp incident was not caused by the recruitment of Armenian armed volunteers but probably helped promote it.

We have also attempted to show that one of the main reasons the Armenian camp incident is presented and interpreted in the way dominant in the current Western historiography was the French desire to show it as a sectarian conflict. By so doing, the French mandatory authorities sought to justify their brutal suppression tactics, especially the bombardment of Damascus, which was criticized widely. This was not the first time that clashes between the locals and the refugees were portrayed as Christian massacres orchestrated by Muslims, the aim

being to justify the need for the French mandate to protect the Christians. (We know that previously the same had happened with the Aleppo and Beirut incidents).

Armenian and Communist works have preferred to keep silent over the incident. Several factors may explain this neglect. Armenian and Syrian-Lebanese scholars have been reluctant to speak about any “dark episodes” that happened to the Armenian communities in the past in these countries to avoid distorting the delicate friendship achieved between them. (The silence over the Aleppo massacre is another case in point.). The silence of the Communist historiography may be because such a bloody incident did not fit the Communist ideology that aimed to create a common (Syrian-Armenian) platform to combat the “French colonizers.”

It is also self-evident that the events leading to the bombardment had left thousands dead and destroyed numerous villages. The bombardment itself is considered the most brutal in colonial history. All these events dominated the foreground, leaving the Damascus incident in the shadows. As small as it was, the incident had immense importance for the Armenian refugee community in Syria since the physical safety of the refugees and the future of their community were endangered. Being accused of siding with the French, their neutrality was challenged, obliging them to take sides. This latter act would make the internal divisions in the community even bigger, resulting in the split into two distinct, irreconcilable blocs (pro-Soviet and pro-ARF) that would mark the entire 1920s and 1930s.

As well as investigating Armenian participation in the Revolt, we have also studied sources that spread rumors about the “armed Armenian bands.” We have shown that one such important source was the Turkish press, which was spreading such fake news well before the Revolt. We have suggested that there might be a connection between the accusations later made by the Syrian-Palestinian Committee and Turkish propaganda, given the close ties between the Syrian-Palestinian Committee and Turkey. An example of their cooperation was their success in bringing an international fact-finding mission to Syria led by the ICRC. In this mission, all sides pursued their own goals, as demonstrated. The mission, however, would have lasting consequences in Syria, laying the foundations for a large-scale refugee settlement scheme under the auspices of the LoN, ICRC, and ILO.

Since the same organizations had also pledged their support to another major refugee settlement scheme, this time in Soviet Armenia, the two schemes increasingly became entangled. The French connections in Syria and in these organizations, in their turn, helped steer all the funds and efforts to the realization of just one of them – the Syrian scheme, which was carried out at the expense of the other. The Syrian scheme also demanded “sacrifices” due to the blurred status of the refugee; Armenian refugees were entitled to “refugee-support

schemes” only if they were truly stateless. In the case of the Armenians, who had meanwhile become citizens in Syria, the flexibility of the international organizations was astonishing.

Finally, we show how the new deportations and the exodus of the Armenian refugees from Turkey at the end of the 1920s turned the Syrian Jazira into a major refugee hosting site, albeit not always in the way the French authorities wished. The creation of Tell Brack was an excellent example of how the agency of the refugees, as well as the direct cooperation of their leaders with the local authorities, could have a lasting impact on the settlements. It also showed that such cooperation could survive French opposition and even outlive the mandate.

## Part IV: Spatial representations of the “homeland”; where is the homeland? 1930–1948

Part IV analyses the third major anti-Armenian polemic in Syria during the interwar years; the accusation that Armenia refugees attempted to create a “national home” in Syria following the example of the Jews in neighboring Palestine. At the end of the 1920s, such fears did not represent entirely imaginary or misplaced suspicions. Syrian Jazira soon became home to thousands of Armenian refugees (as well as Assyrians and Kurds) due to the third exodus from Turkey.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation is only concerned with the Armenian case.

The refugee settlements and the rapid establishment of numerous villages and urban centers (Hassake and Qamishli) attracted the attention of the Syrian nationalists in Damascus, who rang alarm bells that Jazira, “the cradle of Arabness,” was being “conquered” by newcomers who wished to establish a homeland for themselves there. The discourse of the Damascene nationalists vis-à-vis the incoming refugees has been studied and analyzed by both White and Altuğ.

By documenting the Syrian nationalist discourse vs. the incoming refugees (Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians), both White and Altuğ have demonstrated the territorialization of the Syrian Jazira. They explained how a territory only loosely connected with the main cities of Syria was increasingly claimed by the Syrian nationalists and came to be viewed as a Syrian national land that ought to be protected. Both scholars agree that the ensuing Syrian nationalist discourse against the Armenian refugees who arrived in Syria as a result of the last exodus “caused extreme alarm and anxiety among the Syrian Arab nationalists,” and their reactions differed significantly from their previous responses.<sup>2</sup> Why these reactions were different? What had changed now compared to the earlier exodus and settlements? Why were the Armenian

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<sup>1</sup> For the Assyrians see Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 213; Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 96-103; Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East, 1858-1939* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023), 103; Sami Zubeida, “Contested Nations: Iraq and the Assyrians,” *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 6:3 (2000); Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire. Les acteurs européens et la scène proche-orientale pendant l’entre-deux-guerres*, (Sorbonne, Paris, 2004). For the Kurds, see Jordi Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Bern : Peter Lang, 2007), Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), chapter 4, Seda Altuğ, “Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land, and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939),” (Unpublished diss., Utrecht University, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Altuğ, “Making of Refugee-ness and Armenians in French Syria (1915–1939): Religion, Land, History,” in *Armenians in Syria*, ed. Antranik Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018), 170, 172; Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-1939,” *Past and Present*, N:235 (2017), 141-178.

refugees suspected of creating a “national home” in Syria? Were these refugees voiceless “French settlers” in these settlement schemes, as claimed? Did they endorse the settlement schemes unanimously? Why was the discourse of the Armenian “national home” more prominent and different than the discourse of the Kurdish and Assyrian “national homes” in Jazira documented by White and Altuğ? Is it possible to trace the origins of the contentious “national home?” Were the suspicious of the Syrian nationalists baseless? What roles did the Soviet authorities in Yerevan and Moscow and the Turkish press play in the construction of the image of the Armenians as “French ‘settlers?’”

By proposing answers to these questions, this chapter aims to challenge Watenpaugh’s famous article on the “survivor’s bargain” by demonstrating that the Armenian refugees did not always enjoy the claimed French “material and discursive support.” Part IV also builds on the approach suggested by Mathieu Cimino, exploring the connection between the colonial authorities, their civil servants and officers acting on the ground, and the local communities and their representatives over a longer time period.<sup>3</sup> Historian Tejel has already shown how French local authorities in the Syrian Jazira, the intelligence service officers, and the military personnel, in particular, were more determined and ambitious for the pacification of Jazira by bringing it under their firm control and formalizing the border with Turkey. Therefore, these men often undertook actions that were against the wishes of the French central authorities in Beirut and Paris.<sup>4</sup> The Armenian settlement at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s happened in close cooperation between these French officers stationed in the Jazira and the Armenian refugee leaders. The establishment of the Tell Brack settlement, which resulted from such cooperation, is a case in point. It was set up against the wishes of the French authorities in Beirut and outlived the French mandate despite continuous efforts by the French authorities to dismantle it. Armenian-French cooperation, however, was not the only key to the success of this settlement. Another vital area of cooperation, the one between the Armenian leaders and the local Syrian authorities, was more crucial for its survival. This cooperation proves that colonization of the Syrian space by the refugees was, after all, not without the consent of the local Syrians, as argued by Seda Altuğ.<sup>5</sup> Nor were the local Syrian authorities

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<sup>3</sup> Mathieu Rey, “Drawing a Line in the Sand? Another (Hi)Story of Borders” in *Syria: Borders, Boundaries and the State*, ed., Mathieu Cimino, (Oxford, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 33; M. Rey, in his turn, adops this approach from Lefebvre, Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de sable, frontières de papier. Histoire de territoires et de frontières, du jihad de Sokoto à la colonisation française du Niger (XIX e–XXe siècles)* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Jordi Tejel, “The Terrier Plan and the Emergence of a Kurdish Policy Under the French Mandate in Syria, 1926–1936,” *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21:1-2 (2007), 93–109, 93; see also Seda Altuğ, “The Turkish-Syrian Border and the Politics of Difference” in *Syria: Borders, Boundaries*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Altuğ, “Making of Refugee-ness,” 167, 168.

hostile towards the refugees, especially outside Damascus, as the Syrian nationalist press (of Damascus) tended to claim. Moreover, the Armenian refugee community was neither homogenous as presented, nor were French mandatory authorities and Syrian nationalists the only players in Syria determining the agency, the strategies, and the actions of the refugee leaders. Part IV is, therefore, devoted to unveiling the Armenian “national home” in Syria and its many layers.

In addition to the above-mentioned literature, Part IV also builds on other important historical accounts, the works of Armenian historians Ani Fishenkjian and Hakob Cholakian on the Armenian settlement in Jazira, the memories of Hakob Jeghelian, the works of historians Jordi Tejel and Vahé Tachjian on Jazira, as well as several archival and secondary sources.

## **Chapter I: An “Armenian national home” in Syria? Tracing the origins of the Armenian “national home”**

This chapter aims to trace the origins of the contentious term “Armenian national home.” It aims to contextualize the Syrian nationalist discourses and the fears regarding such a “home” by revealing how and when it was employed by the Syrian nationalists and why this rhetoric differed from the previous suspicions. The responses of the Armenian refugee leaders, the political parties, and their press outlets against these accusations are presented, too, along with the impact of the rhetoric on the Armenian refugee community.

### **An Armenian “national home” in Syria just a Syrian nationalist illusion?**

Discussions about the “Armenian home” could be traced back to 1927 when the Greek government renewed its demand before the LoN to remove the Armenian refugees of Greece and place them elsewhere. On March 22, 1927, Emir Fouad Arslan, the Druze deputy of the Lebanese parliament, declared in the Assembly that the French intended to transfer 70,000 Armenians from Greece to Lebanon. Although the French representative immediately replied that neither did Greece have that many Armenians nor did the French intend to bring any of them to Lebanon, the news spread quickly in the local press. Many articles were devoted to this news in the Syrian and Lebanese papers; in particular, the articles of *Al-Ahrar* stood out. Not only did the paper spread an aggressive polemic against the Armenians, but it also challenged the French mandatory authorities by declaring that the French did not have the right to replace



the locals with foreigners.<sup>6</sup> All the anti-Armenian articles were collected and submitted to the attention of the High Commissioner by intelligence officers. One intelligence report was particularly interesting. It informed Beirut that news of the plans to bring more refugees from Greece had created much noise among the nationalists and the Armenians alike. The former thought it was yet another attempt to reinforce the Christian element in Syria. The latter, in their turn, thought that the French intended to bring more Armenian refugees to Syria to create an Armenian army to reconquer Cilicia in case Greece and Italy attacked Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

The talks about an “Armenian national home” resurfaced in the autumn of the following year. This time the 70,000 refugees became 100,000. On September 19, 1928, the French-owned *Havas* news agency reported the settlement of 100,000 Armenians in Northern Syria and praised the LoN’s Refugee Commission for the positive efforts by the mandatory power to settle the Armenian refugees. The High Commissioner immediately instructed *Havas* to dismiss that news and clarify that the praise for the LoN had been about all the refugees *already* in Syria and Lebanon, *regardless of their ethnicity and religion*. The agency was also instructed to explain that France had been supporting the refugees for many years to make them self-sufficient.<sup>8</sup> Denial of the news even appeared in the pages of nationalist *Al-Sha‘b* in two subsequent articles.<sup>9</sup> This notwithstanding, the rebuttals did little to allay the public’s fears in Syria and provided a basis for *Mirsad*, *Qabas*, *Fata Al-Arab*, *Al-Sha‘b*, and others to publish aggressive articles, creating a wave of anti-Armenian polemic. This time Syrian nationalists challenged the right of the French authorities to host (or not) refugees in Syria and Lebanon without consulting the Syrian authorities. *Al-Sha‘b* informed its readers that complaint letters were sent to the French foreign ministry and the LoN:

We complain against the decision for the re-settlement of 100,000 Armenians in Syria, as we, the Syrians are the owners of this country, and we have the right to have our say on this kind of decision. We refuse to allow the entrance of even one Armenian to Syria as of today and do not wish to have our homeland turned into a congregation of ethnicities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Al-Ahrar*’s article of March 17, 1927 see translated in CADN-SL 2388, Solomiac, le Délégué du Haut-Commissaire au Liban., à le Haut-Commissaire Beyrouth, 31 mars 1927.

<sup>7</sup> CADN-SL 2388, Sûreté générale, Renseignement, N: 174, Beyrouth, 21 mars 1927.

<sup>8</sup> CADN-SL 575, Note pour la Press, (no date, no signature).

<sup>9</sup> “Kaḏīya sukan al-ārman fi Sūrīya” [The Settlement Issue of Armenians in Syria], *Al-Sha‘b*, September 28, 1928, 3; About the French denial of the news see “Al-ārman fi Sūrīya: Ithān” [Armenians in Syria], *Al-Sha‘b*, September 30, 1928, 2.

<sup>10</sup> “Īskān al-ārman fi sūrīyā” [The Settlement of Armenians in Syria], *Al-Sha‘b*, June 21, 1928, 2. (Emphasized by the author).

The message of *Al-Qabas* was identical, “*We will not allow the entrance of even one Armenian in our country. We will not allow our country to become a shelter for intruders and strangers.*”<sup>11</sup>

The second theme discussed in the Syrian nationalist press revolved around the idea that the Armenian refugees sustained the French rule, which was the imposed “gift” of the LoN. In this context, the parallels between the French-backed Armenian settlement in Syria and the British-backed settlement of Jews in Palestine were widely discussed. How otherwise to justify the continuous support of these two powerful powers to these refugees?

*Al-Sha‘b* gave the best description of how the Syrians felt. Syrians were astonished to see how the refugees had managed to gain the support of the rich nations to end their poverty. How, with the support of “powerful men” and the LoN, the Armenians were given Syrian territories ... forcing the Syrians to make comparisons with Israel.<sup>12</sup> *Al-Sha‘b* made sure to mention in all its articles that the Syrians were not hostile towards the Armenians and they were not indifferent to their great suffering, on the contrary. However, it was clear that “minorities” (*äkalīyāt*) were the main justification for the French tyranny in Syria.” The French insisted that minorities, including Armenians, required protection; Syrians, therefore, needed to be cautious about the Armenian presence for several reasons. First, it was apparent that the French wished to form certain groupings in the main centers – Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut – to achieve their political goals. Minority protection politics were responsible for the colonization of Syria. Then, the author referred to the granting of citizenship to the Armenians and offered an interesting interpretation. The granting of citizenship had been a Syrian act (not a French one) done for the sake of Syrian national interests to achieve national unity (*al-wahda al-wataniya*). However, now the French were trying to exploit the Syrian sympathy toward the Armenians to prevent that same national unity.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, *Istiklal* of Damascus accused the deputies of accepting Armenian intruders in the Syrian Assembly, which had given them the right to create a *national home in Syria*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Al-Qabas*, September 25, 1928, cited in CADN-SL 575, “Damas poteste contre l’installation des arméniens,” télégramme adressé au Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, no date. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>12</sup> “ḥalab: wa Iskän al-ärman” [Aleppo, Settlement of Armenians], *Al-Sha‘b*, February 1, 1928, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Adib Al-Sefdi, “Al-ṣ‘ubāt al-dīniyā wa al-jinsiyā: ‘alā thikrial-mas‘alata al-sukan al-arman fī süriya” [The Religious and Ethnic Difficulties in Syria: Settlement of the Armenians], *Al-Sha‘b*, September 27, 1928, 1; “Al-lājūn wa al-arman” [The Armenian refugees and the League of Nations], *Al-Sha‘b*, February 21, 1929, 3; “Masā‘la al-aqaliyāt ämām ‘uṣaba alümam” [The Issue of the Minorities Before the League of Nations], *Al-Sha‘b*, February 25, 1929, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Istiklal* 20 novembre 1928, cited in CADN-SL 575, Extrait de son artilce de fond intitulé : “Le grand meeting des députés dans la Capitlae ;” “Le Foyer national arménien menace la sécurité des syriens.”

The black humor applied by *Al-Mirsad* was even more illustrative. The Armenians were depicted as the third colony inside two other colonies – the French occupation army and the local government. These were people that no other country had agreed to host except for hospitable Syria. Now, like the sons of Israel, they wished to create a national home in Syria. It was one of the gifts of the LoN, the inventor of the so-called “mandate.”<sup>15</sup>

It was no accident, then, that all the financial allocations to refugee settlements made by the French and LoN were duly reported in the Syrian newspapers. The news of the allocation of 300,000 by the LoN was reported immediately, as was the vote of the French senate for 3 million francs.<sup>16</sup> These allocations naturally worried the Syrians. However, they were even more concerned to learn that the Syrian government was actively involved in the settlement and that even the Syrian state budget had been used for this purpose, a discovery that outraged the editors of *Al-Sha‘b*. The latter cited the *Herold Tribune* of Palestine, which had reported that 12,000 Armenians were working in textiles in Syria compared to 28,000 who were farmers. Recently 3,000 more Armenians were settled in Alexandretta, where Muslims had sold their land under pressure from the local authorities. Increasingly larger parcels of land were sold to the new settlers. *Al-Sha‘b* wondered what the local or the French mandatory authorities had in mind by settling “these hardworking elements in our country” and if they had fully considered all the dangers and risks.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that the discussions in the Syrian press in 1927–1928 regarding the “Armenian home” were quickly dismissed was not only thanks to the firm and official denials of the French High Commissioner, as the latter believed, “Syrians were reassured, and the public mind calmed down.”<sup>18</sup> There were at least three other factors that reassured the Syrian nationalists. First, the large-scale immigration of the Armenians from Syria and Lebanon, mostly to the USA, which was reported in both the Syrian and Armenian press. *Al-Sha‘b* argued that, since Armenians were leaving Syria in significant numbers, there was no danger that new Armenians would come. The economic conditions did not allow the refugees to earn their daily bread despite their efforts.<sup>19</sup> Second, the declarations by the refugee leaders’ that the Armenians had no intention of settling down permanently in Syria. Some of the declarations were printed in

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<sup>15</sup> *Mirsad*, 13 septembre 1928, cited in CADN-SL 575, “Extrait de son artilec intitulé “Colonie dans une Colonie dans une autre Colonie.”

<sup>16</sup> “Iskän al-ärman” [Settlement of Armenians], *Al-Sha‘b*, November 8, 1928, 2.

<sup>17</sup> “Kiyf yatawazau‘al-ärman fi bilädinā” [How Armenians are Spread in Syria?] *Al-Sha‘b*, November 19, 1928, 2.

<sup>18</sup> CADN-SL 2388, Le Haut-Commissaire à Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères Beyrouth, 17 octobre 1928.

<sup>19</sup> “Hijra al-ärman” [Immigration of the Armenians], *Al Sha‘b*, October 26, 1928, 2; “Iskan al-ärman” [Settlement of Armenians], *Al Sha‘b*, November 9, 1928, 1. For Armenian press see “Suriyahay Artagaghti Artiv” [Immigration of the Armenians out of Syria], *Droshak*, December 1-2, 1928.

the Syrian press, usually on the front pages, and accompanied by the sentence “Word that everyone has to read . . . this is what the Armenians say about their settlement and not what the others say about them.” This was surely done to attract the attention of the readers. In one particular case, *Al-Sha‘b* cited *Masis*, an Armenian paper from London under the same heading.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the Greek government did not insist on removing its Armenians until 1930; thus, no additional refugees arrived from Greece. Consequently, all the previous talks were dismissed as mere rumors. It was not until 1930 that the same rumors were revived in the light of the new Greek demand, which pressed for the removal of its Armenian population. This demand and its consequences will be discussed in later chapters.

Reflecting on the Syrian nationalist discourse, White concluded that the French actions in allowing refugees to settle and granting them citizenship and voting rights created sovereignty crises that raised important questions about who held power in Syria and who was entitled to make such decisions. While there was a nominative Syrian government, in practice, the French authorities decided on all important matters.<sup>21</sup> White, however, made his argument in relation to the refugee settlement with the granting of citizenship and voting rights, which we have already discussed. Regarding refugee settlement, on the other hand, we have the example of Tell Brack, which was the result of a cordial collaboration between Armenian leaders and the Syrian authorities and to which the French objected. The example of Tell Brack is telling in many ways; it shows that Armenian refugee settlements were not seen as population engineering by the French authorities. Instead, the Armenians and the local Syrian authorities had a mutual interest in developing the agriculture in the region and sedentarizing the tribes. Why then did refugee settlement provoke sovereignty crises among the Syrian nationalists in the capital? Were the Syrian nationalists the only ones disturbed by the major Armenian gatherings on the Syrian-Turkish border? In the following chapters, we will aim to reveal the possible answers.

It turned out that the prospect of creating such an “Armenian home” (read “a compact Armenian settlement”) on the Syrian-Turkish border created “sovereignty crises,” in the words of White, and not only among the Syrian nationalists. Several other countries, namely Turkey, the USSR, and Soviet Armenia, were equally disturbed. Their concerns will be revealed in the next chapters. Meanwhile, the source that encouraged the circulation of the “Armenian national

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<sup>20</sup> See for example “Kalimat iajibu ān taqrā’: al-ārman wa qaḍīya iskānihim fī sūriyā” [Word Everyone Must Read: Armenians and Their Settlement Issue in Syria], *Al-Sha‘b*, December 21, 1928, 1.

<sup>21</sup> White, “Refugees and the Definition of Syria.”

home” term was an unexpected one. The timing and the overall political situation in Syria and globally were the keys. In order to understand the political situation in Syria, we briefly discuss it below.

### **The constitutional deadlock in Syria and the Armenian “national home”**

Meanwhile, constitutional crises continued in Syria. The Assembly was suspended in August 1928 initially for three months “to give the nationalists some time to reflect.” The nationalists, in their turn, promised to keep calm and refrain from organizing demonstrations. In their efforts to keep a high profile, the National Bloc opted for the organization of peaceful but sizeable rallies. One such rally with more than 6,000 participants was organized in Aleppo on August 26, 1928. It comprised diverse social layers, including artisans, merchants, the youth, and quarter chiefs. Besides Ibrahim Hananu and Dr. Kayyali, the Greek-Orthodox deputy from Damascus – Fa’iz al-Khuri, and the Armenian Catholic deputy from Aleppo – Fathallah Asiyun made speeches.<sup>22</sup> While Kayyali highlighted that Syrians were against the mandate, which meant colonization, Khury called for solidarity between the Christians and Muslims, advising that the Christians should not be misled by either the French or the British under the pretext of protection. He was a Christian and at the same time, one of the drafters of the constitution, and could guarantee that the constitution foresaw more rights for religious minorities than the mandatory could provide.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, two more nationalist leaders, Hashim al-Atasi and Jamil Mardam, privately informed the mandatory power about their willingness to add another article in the constitution that would reconcile both sides and offer a way out of the deadlock. This was a clear sign of willingness to cooperate. Nevertheless, the French did not make haste to reconcile; after several short-term suspensions, the Assembly was suspended *sine die* on February 7, 1929, giving way to endless negotiations.

In the meantime, de Caix, who continued to advise Quai d’Orsay, had a different approach to the ongoing crisis. Syria was not ready for political independence, elections, or a constitution. Political maneuvers were to be a secondary consideration, with priority given to administrative and economic development, which would gain the sympathy of the masses and also fulfill France’s international obligations.<sup>24</sup> The French had all the goodwill they needed to

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Shambrook, *French Imperialism in Syria, 1927-1936* (UK, Ithaca Press, 1998), 29, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 344.

<sup>24</sup> MAE, vol. 227, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, fn. 5, 42-43.

develop Syria by initiating large projects (construction of the roads, rails, tramways, and ports); however it was the Syrian “extremists” who opposed the developments. Therefore, Ponsot had no choice but to suspend the constitution; this is how *Argues* explained the situation in Syria. Moreover, 90% of the Syrians were illiterate; therefore, the French mandatory authorities could not rely on mass opinion during these difficult times.<sup>25</sup>

One important economic project was the settlement of the Armenian refugees, which had already started under the auspices of the LoN, and included the development of the agricultural potential of the Syrian Jazira. Although the settlement projects went as planned, the French had to slow down and be more cautious given the violent developments in neighboring Palestine as well as the signs from the Syrians revealing that their patience was not endless.

Large but peaceful demonstrations were staged occasionally by the National Bloc, the purpose of which was twofold: to demonstrate to the French the Bloc’s influence and reinforce their position among the Syrians.<sup>26</sup> In August 1929, Syrians were greatly affected by yet another event: violent anti-British, anti-Zionist riots which broke out in Palestine and inevitably attracted the attention of the Syrians.<sup>27</sup> The latter, in their turn, organized a demonstration in solidarity with the Palestinians on August 26 in Damascus, followed by a larger one on August 30. No anti-French declarations were made, the only chants being in connection with the Balfour Declaration. Nevertheless, the French authorities feared that the mood could quickly turn anti-French, and the demonstrations were dispersed violently. The National Bloc was worried about these demonstrations; it did not wish to appear anti-British and lose potential British support against the French, nor did it wish to divert the attention of the Syrians from the pressing issues at home.<sup>28</sup>

Violent events in Palestine had also alarmed the French, obliging them to scale down the Jazira settlement plan. Fearing similar reactions in Syria, in September 1929, the French High Commission ordered its delegates all over Syria to report any anti-Armenian reactions.<sup>29</sup> At this delicate moment, a solution to the deadlock was found in Paris; it was decided to promulgate the modified constitution one-sided. Moreover, it ought to be done quickly enough

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<sup>25</sup> CADN-SL 1588, “La Syrie veut-elle rester pauvre ?” [Does Syria Wish to Stay Poor?], *Argus de la presse*, 1 Avril 1929.

<sup>26</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> 1929 riots also known as the Western wall disturbances, were the first large-scale occurrences of fighting among the Arabs, Jews and the British mandatory authorities.

<sup>28</sup> MAE vol. 206, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, fn.13, 45.

<sup>29</sup> CADN-SL 573, Direction du Service des Renseignements du Levant, Note (au sujet des Arméniens), Confidentiel. N : 2329, Beyrouth, 3 septembre 1929. The deadline for the reporting was October 1.

to include it in the next report to the Permanent Mandate Commission meeting (June 1930) to have something positive to say. In the meantime, the economic development had to be sufficiently visible to impress the Syrians before the new elections.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, no French declarations were made until May 1930, when clear signs were received that the Syrians had lost their patience. On April 11, 1930, Hashim Al-Atashi met the High Commissioner to warn him of a possible upheaval unless there was an announcement and a solution to the crisis. Even then, he was told that Ponsot still awaited instructions from Paris. Atashi then made a public statement on April 15 in which he put the entire blame for the current situation on the French authorities.<sup>31</sup> The French authorities realized it was time to promulgate the decrees to maintain calm everywhere; every tiny detail needed to be prepared in advance to avoid any negative action. It was decided to announce the decrees simultaneously in all the states. On the morning of May 22, 1930, 20 journalists were summoned to the High Commissioner's office, where they were handed the decrees. The same occurred in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Suwayda. The way the news was broken led one paper from Beirut to compare the announcement of the decrees with the launch of a campaign against locusts or the opening of a hunting season but not something as important as the promulgation of the constitution.<sup>32</sup> While *L'Echo de Paris*, published the good news even before the announcement.<sup>33</sup>

In total, six decrees were signed; the organic laws of the governments of Latakia, the Jabal Druze, and the Sanjak of Alexandretta, Common Interests, and the long-awaited Lebanese and Syrian constitutions.<sup>34</sup> Needless to say, all the Syrian circles remained dissatisfied with the decrees, which had added new articles safeguarding French rule and omitted to mention anything about the general amnesty, elections, or the provisional government. At the end of May 1930, Syrian leaders from Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs met to discuss their response but could not agree on tactics. While the Aleppo delegates supported radical measures, the Damascene leaders, headed by Jamil Mardam, advocated cooperation. A big rally was organized in Aleppo on June 10, where Hanano and Dr. Kayyali rejected the imposed Constitution.<sup>35</sup> On June 10 and 11, many shops remained closed in Damascus as a sign of protest. Some 20 people were also arrested.<sup>36</sup> As Khury explained, things looked even worse and more depressing when, a month later, Iraq was promised independence and admission to

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<sup>30</sup> MAE 227, Ponsot à Berthlot, 19 décembre 1929, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, fn. 16, 46.

<sup>31</sup> MAE vol. 478, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, fn. 26, 27 49.

<sup>32</sup> CADN-SL 468, *Le Journalist Errant*, 26 mai 1930, cited in Ibid, fn 30, 50.

<sup>33</sup> *L'Echo de Paris*, 22 mai 1930, cited in Ibid, 51.

<sup>34</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French*, 348.

<sup>35</sup> CADN-SL 467, "Information," 11 juin 1930. Hanano's speech see, Shambrook, *French, Imperialism*, fn 33, 52.

<sup>36</sup> CADN-SL 468, Ponsot à Paris, 12 juin 1930, Service des renseignements, N :1160, cited in ibid, fn. 34, 52.

the League of Nations. Syrians had always considered the Iraqis socially and culturally inferior, yet it was Iraq that was given a treaty, recognized independence, and now was being admitted to the League of Nations as an advanced nation.<sup>37</sup>

While the constitutional crises have been studied in detail by Khoury and Shambrook, they both failed to consider one crucial factor that was used in May–June 1930 to divert the attention of the Syrian nationalists from the Assembly and constitutional crisis. Instead, they both focused on the dire economic conditions, the effects of the Great Depression that were already fully felt in Syria, the lowering of the wages, the unemployment that reached new levels, the further decline of the traditional handicrafts, the new taxes, and the inflation of the Turkish *mejidi* (silver price), which was often used to pay wages.<sup>38</sup> Based on British records, Khoury concluded that many frustrated National Bloc members could do nothing but leave “for their cottages in gardens around the towns or for the resorts of Bludan and Sofar for the summer.”<sup>39</sup> However, the reality is somewhat different if we include the other French tactics used to divert the attention of the nationalists; namely, the settlement of the Armenian refugees in the Syrian Jazira was suddenly presented in a different light, emphasizing the danger of establishing an “Armenian home” in Syria.

### **Toward an “Armenian home”: why an “Armenian home” and why now?**

In June 1930, right in the middle of the constitutional crisis, the May–June edition of *France-Orient* landed on the tables of the Syrian nationalists like a bombshell.<sup>40</sup> It explicitly mentioned an “Armenian national home in the borderlands of Syria,” outraging the nationalists.<sup>41</sup> Although this was not the first article on the subject, it was perceived differently for several reasons: there had been a new influx of Armenian refugees since mid-1929 who had mostly settled in the Upper Jazira. *France-Orient* was an initiative of the French foreign ministry, and its president, Le Nail, was the French delegate before the LoN responsible for the settlement of Armenian refugees in Syria. As it happened, Le Nail had visited Syria in mid-April, staying until June. Once in Syria, Le Nail had traveled over 3,000 km accompanied by Burnier, visiting all the

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<sup>37</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 348.

<sup>38</sup> Sa’id Himadeh, *Economic Organization of Syria* (Beirut, 1936), 172-173; Khoury, *Syria and the French*, 349.

<sup>39</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 348.

<sup>40</sup> *France-Orient* was the official organ of the Committee bearing the same name. It was founded in 1913 under the auspices of the French Foreign Ministry. The committee was usually led by high-ranked personnel. The main cover stated clearly that it was subsidized by the French general residence office of Morocco and the French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon.

<sup>41</sup> Bulletin Officiel du Comité *France-Orient*, politique, économique, financier, XI, N: 71, (Mai-Juin 1930), 29.



urban and rural refugee settlements as well as the sites of the future settlements.<sup>42</sup> Immediately after his visit, the Syrian newspapers had started reporting that the LoN had instructed the French delegate to create an Armenian “national home” in the Upper Jazira.<sup>43</sup>

Before the publication of *France-Orient*, occasional rumors had circulated but without any proof. Given its official character and Le Nail’s position, this publication seemed to be the missing proof that immediately made the story of the “Armenian national home” the hot topic in all the major papers in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. In these articles, as we shall see, rumors, stories – real or imaginary – and scraps of telegrams were all interwoven to prove to the public the ongoing making of such a “home.”

Absurdly, it turned out, the article in *France-Orient* was actually a reprint from the Lebanese *Al-Ahwal*, which had appeared at the beginning of March 1930, at least three months prior to the publication of *France-Orient*. Moreover, this article contained many factual errors that even an average Syrian could recognize (for example, Sahak II, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, was presented as the head of the Armenian Catholics, *Al-Ahwal*’s place of publication was given as Aleppo instead of Beirut). Armenian circles had publicly condemned the publication of this article in *Al-Ahwal* at the time. The Alepine *Yeprat*, for one, had lamented that it surpassed any limits of misunderstanding, exaggeration, and utter unfriendliness (*tyurimatsutyán, chapazantcutyan ev anbayatskamutyánamen chap ev sahman kantsnin*).<sup>44</sup> According to *Yeprat*, *Al-Ahwal*’s article was the result of an ill-drafted text signed by the Catholicos and the newly formed refugee committee pleading for financial support for the newly arrived refugees. *Yeprat* did not believe in the authenticity of this call, which had appeared in the ARF organ *Husaber* just a few days ago. Indeed, *Yeprat* stated that the call had unnecessary political overtones, especially the sentence “urging the remaining Armenians of Turkey to leave Turkey for Syria, and the newly arrived ones to bring their relatives still in Turkey as soon as possible,” which was suspicious. The editors condemned the ill-formulated calls of the Armenian leaders, whose exaggeration of their roles and actions became a reason for such malicious publications, as was the case with *Al-Ahwal*. The question is why *France-Orient* reprinted this article in its pages without any comment or explanation, right after a text reporting Le Nail’s visit to Syria?

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<sup>42</sup> For details on his trip, see LoN archives, C1584/480/20C/18894/16983, Haut-Commissariat pour les réfugiés, Confidentiel, Rapport de M. Pierre Le Nail sur l’établissement des réfugiés arméniens en Syrie (Question N :4 de l’ordre du jour), Séance de 26 août 1930.

<sup>43</sup> CADN-SL 575, *Ahrar* May 6, 1930 cited in Immigration arménienne, Revue du presse N: 53 au 7 May 1930.

<sup>44</sup> Editorial, “Ankeghts Khosker Animast Hratarakutyán Me ev Avelord Kochi Mi Shurj” [Honest Words in the Occasion of the Senseless Publication and the Unnecessary Call], *Yeprat*, March 15, 1930, 1.

The High Commissioner's Office in Beirut was equally interested in discovering the truth behind this unfortunate article. The text not only created much noise in the newspapers but was also the cause of minor diplomatic crises between the Quai d'Orsay and the High Commissioner's office in Beirut. Tetreau sent an angry telegram reminding the Department how emotional and sensitive the Syrian nationalist circles had become after the mandatory authorities had announced their intention of settling 100,000 Armenians in the Upper Jazira. Since then, similar "fake news" had regularly been circulated against the French, obliging the mandatory authorities to denounce it officially. Considering that *France-Orient* was a semi-official organ and Le Nail was head of the *France-Orient* Committee, such articles were unnecessary and provocative, endangering all the French efforts in Syria. Moreover, they could endanger French relations with the Turkish government, which would take *France-Orient's* publication as proof of their long-standing suspicions of a secret French settlement project. Thus, Le Nail was advised to publish an official denouncement in the next issue.<sup>45</sup>

Warnings were received from Aleppo, too. Lavastre had informed Ponsot about the complaints made by the head of the Turkish delegation to the border delimitation committee, who had threatened to deport the remaining Armenians from Turkey. The Turkish press, in its turn, reported alleged Kurdo-Armenian cooperation and joint irregular forces as of June 1930. Moreover, the Turkish consul of Aleppo accused the mandatory power of being pro-Armenian. All of this threatened the bon-voisinage treaty with Turkey, a situation that France could not afford during the political crises in Syria.<sup>46</sup> Similar alarming news had been reported by the French ambassador in Turkey.<sup>47</sup>

The day after the news was received that a large number of Armenians were to be settled along the Syrian-Turkish border, *Al-Mokattam* published an article saying that Turkey had burnt the fields on its side of the border.<sup>48</sup> It was also said that British authorities, in their turn, had given some lands to the Kurdish tribes along the Turkish-Iraqi border; thus, Turkey had every reason to think that the French and the British were plotting against her by settling hostile elements along her borders.<sup>49</sup> The newspapers of Lebanon published similar material. For

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<sup>45</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le Haut-Commissaire, Tetreau à le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, "Arméniens en Syrie," N: 628, Beyrouth, 7 aout 1930.

<sup>46</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le delegué adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour le vilayet d'Alep à le Haut-Commissaire "A/s des Arméniens," N : 580, Alep, 28 juillet 1930.

<sup>47</sup> CADN-SL 575, Extrait du bulletin de presse de l'ambassade de France en turquie à Monsieur le Chef du Bureaz Politique, "Foyer Arménien en Syrie" [Armenian Home in Syria], N : 239, 14 mai 1930.

<sup>48</sup> *Al-Mokattam*, "Al-ärman fi Sürîyâ" [Armenians in Syria], cited in CADN-SL 575, Extraits des presses, Journaux du 25 decembre 1929 au 2 Janvier 1930.

<sup>49</sup> CADN-SL 575, Revue de la Presse, "Les Arméniens dans le Nord Syrien" [Armenians in Northern Syria] 20 mai 1930.

example, *Al-Bashir* published on 12 May that Syrians protested against the Armenian settlements in the north because they feared an emerging *national home*.

Soon *Al-Qabas* reported the departure of yet another tribal chief, Emir al-Jarba, who had reportedly been harassed for opposing the settlement of the Armenians in the north. It concluded that “Armenians were to remain strangers for the Syrians and would not deserve the Syrian sympathy. The efforts of the French and some liberal-minded Syrian leaders to replace the Arabs with the Armenians were doomed to fail. The settled foreign elements would bring misfortune to the Syrians one day, and if the author of the article was not to witness it in person, the next generation would do so.”<sup>50</sup>

Earlier, at the beginning of May 1930, Lavaste had reported to the High Commissioner in a confidential note that Ibrahim Hanano, Dr. Kayyali, and Saadallah Jabiri had received a letter from Ihsan al-Sharif, Hashim al-Atassi, and Mazhar Pasha Kaslan (all of them exiled abroad) informing them that it was the LoN that had sent the French deputy Le Nail to Syria at the request of the French. Le Nail aimed to study the possibilities of creating an *Armenian home* in the Upper Jazira (Qamishli, Hassake). As soon as the first colonists were settled, France intended to call all the Armenians abroad and invite them to Syria. “By settling these hardworking people, who would soon suppress the natives, we have just a few years in front of us. Even if we organize another revolt, we will be obliged to consider this project. For the Syrians, it is a question of life and death. We have to spread the news immediately and turn the public opinion against the Armenians.”<sup>51</sup> Other intelligence reports confirmed that nationalists in the two biggest towns – Damascus and Aleppo – were busy exchanging notes “about the French wish to create a homeland for the Armenians at the expense of the Syrians.”<sup>52</sup> Another intelligence report stated that Riad Solh had received a letter from Jemal Mardam informing him about the intention of the nationalists to send a petition to the LoN to protest against the settlement of the Armenians in Jazira in an attempt to “create a national home.”<sup>53</sup> Similar petitions were also signed by Dr. Mustafa Chauwi, Jemal Jabiri, and 70 other notables, including many doctors, lawyers, and merchants.<sup>54</sup>

Syrian leaders were, therefore, busy preparing petitions to the High Commissioner as well as articles to disseminate in the press in Syria and abroad to prevent such a “danger,” as

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<sup>50</sup> “Suriya : Arab Terti Me Sparnaliknere” [Syria: Threatening of An Arab Paper], *Husaber*, April 26, 1930, 2.

<sup>51</sup> CADN-SL 575, Partie 2, renseignements politiques d’ordre confidentiel et destine au H.C, du delegue adjoint du Haut Commissaire pour le vilayet d’Alep, Lavastre, “Voyage du. Monsieur LeNeil,” Alep, mai 10, 1930.

<sup>52</sup> CADN-SL 575, Surete generale, Information N: 880, Etat de Syrie, Hama, Beyrouth, 7 mai 1930.

<sup>53</sup> CADN-SL 575, Direction du service des renseignements du Levant, N: 342 “Arméniens,” Beyrouth, 7 mai 1930.

<sup>54</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le minister des affaires étrangères à Gaston Maugras, Haut Cimmissaire P.I. “Refugiés arméniens,” Paris, 28 septmbre 1928.

reported by a correspondent for *Al-Ahrar*.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the nationalists achieved their goals successfully, for soon all the nationalist press both in Syria and Lebanon were talking about the “Armenian home.”

The French delegate for Deir ez-Zor, Callais, reported the murder of three Armenians (one man and two women) at the end of April.<sup>56</sup> Although all the community leaders were tasked with deploying strict measures to calm the situation, Callais warned that it was better to suspend any new settlement plans until emotions had calmed down and the French position was stronger.<sup>57</sup>

### **Armenian “national home” a French fabrication?**

The French authorities, however, had no intention of offending Turkey. This “Armenian home” threat was intended to divert the attention of the Syrian nationalists from the promulgation of the constitution and other important decrees, and it seemed to work perfectly. Many National Bloc members were kept busy convening meetings and preparing petitions instead of studying the decrees controlling Syrian political life. It was no coincidence, then, that the independent “Armenian national home in the Syrian borders” was printed in the French semi-official organ *France-Orient*. Moreover, the first article on such a national home appeared for the first time in *L'Orient*, a paper published in Beirut and entirely subsidized by the French mandatory authorities.<sup>58</sup>

On January 26, 1930, *L'Orient* published a provocative article under the telling title “Vers un Home Arménien.” The article stated that everyone had found a home; Jews left for the Promised Land, Greeks left for their ancestral homeland... only Armenians were still dispersed all over the world and were still stateless... France, the USA, and the LoN were actively *looking for a place to create a home for them*, for they could no longer be sent to the Syrian cities that were already overcrowded. Where to find a place that could host a few thousand of them? These were the serious questions that were being asked. The paper then mentioned the allocation of the 3 million francs on behalf of the French Senate to the Armenian settlement (December 12, 1929) that aimed to solve the issue. It then mentioned the Armenian

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<sup>55</sup> CADN-SL 575, Presse libanaïense, “L’immigration arménienne dans la Syrie du Nord,” 7 mai, 1930.

<sup>56</sup> “Hayere Huzman Mej: Erku Mayrer ev Eritasrad Me Mortvats” [Armenians Bulversed: Two Mothers and a Young Boy Killed,] *Husaber*, May 1, 1930, 2.

<sup>57</sup> CADN-SL 575, Callais, délégué adjoint du Haut Commissaire pour le sanjak de Deir ez-Zor à monsieur le Haut Commissaire, “Propagande contre réfugiés arméniens,” Deir ez-Zor, 3 Mai, 1930.

<sup>58</sup> In Beirut, the French authorities had two mouthpieces: *L'Orient* and *La Syrie*, both were entirely subsidized by them. Moreover, *La Syrie* and the Syrian branch of the “independent” *Havas* agency had the same director – George Vayssié.

massacres in the Ottoman Empire, Armenian gratitude to the French for their hospitality in Syria and Lebanon, and the Armenian intellectuals' decision to be settled in the deserted territory of the Upper Jazira between the Khabur and the Euphrates so as not to disturb the Syrians. The paper did not forget to mention how this part of Syria had prospered under the Romans in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when it was the granary of the entire region and even produced wheat for export. Then, the paper went as far as to mention that the Armenian settlement was not merely humanitarian action; rather, it was to ensure the French influence in the Middle East. If Upper Jazira was populated by the Armenians and Kurdish tribes who had found shelter escaping from Turkey, the region would be protected from any invasions. Moreover, in the last part of the article, the author started suddenly to write in the first person, leaving no doubt that the author was a high-ranking official from the High Commissioner's office.<sup>59</sup>

“Thanks to the Armenian manpower *we will restore the former* fame of the Jazira which is famous to be the most fertile in Syria, without even mentioning the possibility of finding petrol, which is also plenty in the region.”<sup>60</sup>

Why did the French authorities publish this article in a leading newspaper in Beirut, knowing that it would be read both in Syria and Lebanon? The article's tone was not one to test the mood of the Syrians, nor was it published as a rumor that could easily be denied afterward. It is noteworthy that the previous issue, appearing just one day before, had a long editorial on its front page on “The threat from the North: two-third of the Turkish budget is given to the army,”<sup>61</sup> while the editorial of the day before was entirely devoted to Damascene politics, and the deadlock situation created by the refusal of the nationalist-extremists to cooperate.<sup>62</sup> This latter editorial had asked rhetorically, how long was such a situation to last? How long would the nationalist-extremists oppose the modifications of the draft Constitution? The Syrians were reminded of their level of development before the Syrian Revolt. It had been two years since the entire country was in deficit in industry, agriculture, and trade, and most of the moderates agreed that “the French mandate is a necessity for Syria. “The more far-seeing ones added that “it was also useful.” While most of the people in Syria were convinced about the necessity of

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<sup>59</sup> We suspect that the author was Poidebard, who had already expressed the same wording in his reports kept in the French mandate records, see for example, “Nous tendons, en effet à installer les réfugiés principalement le long de la frontière turque, ce qui offre l'avantage d'établir dans ces régions des populations chrétiennes que leur intérêt tourne vers la France et de constituer ainsi une séparation entre l'élément musulman syrien et les musulmans turcs.” MAE, vol. 299, Père Poidebard, “Notes sur la Haute Djézireh,” 1926.

<sup>60</sup> M.A. “Vers un home armenien” [Toward an Armenian Home], *L'Orient*, Janvier 26, 1930, 2.

<sup>61</sup> “La menace du Nord : Les deux tiers du budget Turc sont consacrés a l'armée” [The Threat from the North : two-third of the Turkish Budget for the Army], *L'Orient*, Janvier 25, 1930, 1.

<sup>62</sup> X.X. “Dans le bric-a- brac Damasain, qui devient la Syrie ? Les populations veulent enfin sortir de l'impasse” [In the Chaos of Damascus, What Shall Become of Syria ? The People Wish at Last to Exit the Dead End], *L'Orient*, Janvier 24, 1930, 1.

the mandate, there were a few stubborn individuals – the extremists, who refused to accept the legitimacy of the mandate and its usefulness.<sup>63</sup>

According to the Armenian communist era historian Topuzyan, it was precisely this negation of the French mandate and its legitimacy that worried the French the most. He argued that, at the end of 1929, when the National Bloc quit the negotiations, Ponsot encouraged the publication of articles about the “Armenian home” in French-subsidized newspapers to divert the attention of the Syrian nationalists on the one hand and justify the French unilateral decisions on the other. According to Topuzyan, it was necessary to show the LoN the unreadiness of Syria for the independence demanded by the Syrian nationalists.<sup>64</sup> We also know from the detailed studies of Khoury and Shambrook that, during this time, lengthy exchanges of letters and views were happening between Beirut and Paris and that the sides had divergent opinions.<sup>65</sup> Topuzyan, who could not know anything about these internal dynamics, thought that the French wished to provoke Armenian massacres or at least armed clashes once again to have proof and get LoN’s approval for their actions in Syria. Such a clash was easy to provoke since most Armenian settlements were small, isolated villages surrounded by Arabic, Kurdish, or nomadic tribes. Topuzyan claimed not only that *L’Orient* was the first to publish successive articles about an “Armenian home,” but it was also the first to draw parallels between the Jewish home in Palestine and the Armenian home in Syria.<sup>66</sup>

However, Topuzyan was highly selective in the articles he chose to cite from *Husaber* and did not cite a single *Husaber* article showing how Soviet Armenia was nervous about this “national home,” a point that we shall discuss later. His task was to show the anxiousness of the Syrians only and the ARF’s suspect connections with the Kurds.<sup>67</sup>

Well before the publication of *L’Orient*, Le Nail had already declared the creation of an “Armenian home” in the Syrian Jazira from the ILO stage during the meeting of December 2, 1929.<sup>68</sup>

It is no longer a question of only assisting these refugees but endeavoring to restore their homes. France has restored peace within the defined frontiers of the vast territories of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune Siriayi ev Libanani Azgayin-Azatagrakan Sharjumnerin* [The Participation of the Armenians in the National Liberation Movement in Syria and Lebanon] (Yerevan, 1968), 58-59.

<sup>65</sup> More on this see Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, chapter 2; Khoury, *Syria under the French*, 346-374.

<sup>66</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune*, 59.

<sup>68</sup> Those present were M. Thiebaut, the representative of the French Red Cross, Le Nail, the representative of the French government, B. Golden from the Save the Children Fund, E. Clouzot, from the ICRC, L. Pashalian, from the Armenian Central Refugee Committee, and Major Johnson from the Nansen Office.

Jazira. The marvelously fertile plains between the Euphrates and the Khabur... *will offer a home for the Armenian people* affording security and prosperity.<sup>69</sup>

It was also Le Nail who had declared during the same meeting that there were no reasons to think that any Syrian opposition would occur; these refugees were to become no burden either to the mandatory authorities, the Syrian state, or the local administration; in fact, everyone was to benefit from their settlement.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the French authorities were convinced that the new settlements in the Syrian Jazira would go entirely unnoticed for Syrian nationalists were primarily interested in the larger cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs and claiming them for the unified Syrian state. Anything outside that orbit did not interest them.<sup>71</sup>

Little did the French authorities know how wrong their calculations were. By 1930, the Syrian nationalists knew that such a settlement with open foreign backing contained serious dangers. In the infamous Balfour Declaration, the British Government had also explicitly mentioned a Jewish “national home” in Palestine, which by 1930 was not just an illusion but a reality. Back then, Arabic newspapers from all over the Levant had warned repeatedly against the potential dangers of Zionism, which was not a mere humanitarian project but a colonial one implying a permanent foreign presence and continuous external support.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Syrian nationalists had every reason to be concerned, especially when the French were using the term Armenian “national home.” This is why, in 1930, the “Armenian home” no longer seemed a groundless rumor to the Syrian nationalists, especially when many factors indicated otherwise.

This time, instead of 70,000 or 100,000, the papers talked about the arrival of “One million Armenians,” as reported by *Al-Ahrar* of Beirut, citing a Jewish paper from Haifa. The Jewish paper, in its turn, had cited a Jewish merchant commenting on the struggling economy in Syria, where the French were keen to develop the country by settling Armenians there. There were 200,000 Armenians already in Syria, and 1 million more were expected.<sup>73</sup>

In December 1929, Le Nail began discussing the “Armenian home.” In January 1930, *L’Orient*, the French subsidized newspaper, picked up the topic, and finally, in June 1930, it was the French semi-official *France-Orient* reporting on the issue. The outcome of these

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<sup>69</sup> CADN-SL 575, Confidential Note, Advisory Committee for Refugees. Meeting of the Armenian Central Committee of Refugees held at the ILO, Geneva, December 2, 1929. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le délégué adjoint p.i. du Haut Commissaire pour le vilayet d’Alep à monsieur le Haut Commissaire de la R. F., Alep, 12 décembre 1929.

<sup>72</sup> Rachid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Chapter 6.

<sup>73</sup> “One Million Armenians,” *Al-Ahrar*, February 27, 1930, cited in *Husaber*, March 4, 1930, 2; Arshakuni, “Hayeru Gaghtni Hayrenike: Azgayin Hastatutyunneru Pataskhanatvutyune” [The Armenian Secret Homeland: The Response of the National Institutions], (a), *Husaber*, April 3, 1930, 1.

articles was the same each time – a widespread debate in the Arabic-speaking press that turned into anti-Armenian propaganda.

The provocative publications in the French subsidized papers referring to the “Armenian home” in the north of Syria and the news of the French allocation of a substantial sum for the settlement of the Armenians in the Upper Jazira only contributed to the spread of the news. *Al-Mokattam* was among the first to react to the allocation of 3 million francs by the French Senate on December 12. On January 1, 1930, it claimed that refugees were settled on the fertile lands that needed a workforce and that by settling this “robust population” along with certain Kurdish tribes in the borderlands, the French authorities aimed to secure the borderlands against any aggression. *Al-Mokattam* had argued that there was no doubt that the Kurdo-Armenian *new home* would prosper in the north of Syria, serving the French interests on the one hand and separating Syria from Muslim Turkey and Iraq on the other. Moreover, the initiative followed the example of neighboring Palestine, where the English were separating Palestine from the other Arab countries.<sup>74</sup>

*L’Orient’s* infamous article, published at the end of January 1930, essentially repeated the message of *Al-Mokattam*, elegantly connecting all the facts, from the financial allocation by the Senate to the requirement for a workforce and increased security in the borderlands. In addition, the article did not omit to draw parallels with neighboring Palestine, thus confirming Syrian suspicions.

The Damascene *Fata’ al-Arab* devoted a lengthy editorial to the article in *L’Orient*, first publishing the entire article, then expressing the Syrian point of view. In its response to *L’Orient*, *Fata’ al-Arab* stated that the latter wished that the Syrians would allow the formation of an *Armenian homeland* in their own country. However, the Syrians, who were familiar with the misfortune of the Romans, did not believe it was possible to create an Armenian home. Those in favor of such a project wished to incite the Arabs, who had managed to expel the Romans with great difficulty. The paper argued that *L’Orient* constantly referred to the Jazira as a deserted, ruined place since the Romans’ departure, and by doing so, it wished to show that the Arabs were wild and keen to steal and destroy. Naturally, the editors of *L’Orient* knew little besides the few subjects taught at St. Joseph college. It was scandalous to read how the

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<sup>74</sup> *Al-Mokattam*, “Al- ārman fi Sūriyā” [Armenians in Syria], cited in CADN-SL 575, Extraits des presses, Journaux du 25 decembre 1929 au 2 Janvier 1930. “Arméniens, creation d’un “home national” arménien en Syrie,” “Les arméniens en Syrie,” Beyrouth, 4 janvier 1930.



Europeans praised the Roman Emperor (Nex) for burning down Aleppo, which had been much bigger and more prosperous than Constantinople back then.<sup>75</sup>

It was obvious that *Fata' al-Arab* wished to educate not only its usual readership but also the *L'Orient* editors about the destructive rule of the Romans that the French praised so much. Moreover, the paper quoted another settlement example from Roman times that had proved disastrous for the Romans. One of the Roman Emperors had allocated land in the Syrian Jazira to be a “home” for a particular dynasty from the Caucasus. This family later brought many misfortunes to the Romans by revolting many times and obliging the emperor to expel them first to Lebanon and then to Cyprus. The paper claimed this was a good lesson for the Arabs; the Armenian settlement in the Jazira did not promise anything good. Instead, it was better to send the Armenians back to Russia, to their historical lands.<sup>76</sup> The story told by *Fata' al-Arab* was full of symbolism; many centuries ago, other people from the Caucasus had been settled there, and rebellions resulted in their deportation. Now the proposed settlers were the Armenians, who also traced their origins to the Caucasus. History was repeating itself, and there was a grave risk that the outcome would be similar. In yet another article, *Fata al-Arab* was even more explicit “are our suspicions being confirmed, then? Do the Armenians wish to grab our lands, establishing a homeland for themselves? Did Syrians feed ravens who now wished to crave their eyes?”<sup>77</sup>

Were the publications about the “Armenian national home” in the French-subsidized papers a mere coincidence? Was it done for a specific purpose? Can we observe a pattern, a tactic employed by the French mandatory authorities to encourage the spread of certain rumors and publications, to divert the attention of the Syrian nationalists from the pressing internal issues, instead concentrating their attention on external dangers, whether real or imaginary? Did it follow the same logic – spreading certain news to test Syrian opinion – then publicly denying it or not, depending on the reactions and the political circumstances? Although there is no trace of this as a policy in the French mandatory records, at least not in the documents consulted by us, we can certainly discern this behavioral pattern.

Finally, we shall also consider the advice of the High Commissioner to Quai d'Orsay to use their next publication to deny the contents of the problematic article in *France-Orient*. The next issue of *France-Orient*, appearing in December 1930, indeed had a small article under the heading “Peuplements arméniens” (Armenian settlements) under the Syria-Lebanon section

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<sup>75</sup> “*Fata' al-Arabi Pataskkhane*” [Fata' al-Arab's Response (to L'Orient)], *Husaber*, February 4, 1930, 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

along with other short texts reporting on the new railway, the pipeline, tobacco, refugee properties, and the economic situation during the past year.<sup>78</sup> While all the articles were connected with the refugee settlement issue either directly or indirectly, the article about the Armenian refugees was not about Upper Jazira or denial of the previous news. Instead, it reported on the successful settlement of the Armenians in Latakia by *the plans and wishes of the League of Nations*. The settlement, the article claimed, had met all the objectives; it was far from the overcrowded places, and refugees were given empty terrain that they could cultivate and become landowners. Moreover, these peaceful and hard-working strangers were already appreciated by the Alawites for their handicrafts. The Alawites, on the other hand, did not show any xenophobia towards them, either social or religious, allowing the newcomers to be fully integrated.<sup>79</sup> The settlement in question might have been Massiaf Armenian village, whose success was also praised by *Husaber*.<sup>80</sup>

Also, *L'Orient* had a follow-up article on the “Armenian home” after the aggressive reactions of the Syrian press.<sup>81</sup> It announced that the Syrians did not like the word “home,” and it was not to be employed anymore. Moreover, it stated that the wording “Armenian home” did not imply a “national” home and said that comparisons with the “Zionist danger” in Palestine were not appropriate either. Armenians did not have any claims over Lebanon and were to be fully assimilated shortly.<sup>82</sup>

Exactly, a year later, in February 1931, the Ramkavar press outlet *Arev* devoted a series of articles to the conditions of the Armenians in Syria, in which the editors deplored the organizational chaos that prevailed on all levels. It also drew the attention of its readership to a new article in *L'Orient*, which had declared once again that, above the French humanitarian action to host the Armenian refugees, it had been her aim to counterbalance the local Muslim population with a strong Christian community. *Arev*'s editors asked a rhetorical question about whether such a bold declaration could be true. They concluded that, if it was true, it should remain secret or at least low profile. They also stated that such declarations served to incite the natives against the Armenian refugees by not allowing any rapprochement between them or else diverted the attention of the nationalists demanding independence by pointing out a new

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<sup>78</sup> *France-Orient*, N : 72, Novembre-Decembre, 22-23.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, “Peuplements arméniens” [The Settlement of the Armenians], 23.

<sup>80</sup> “Hay Haghtakanneru Tghavorume Surio Mej: Haykakan Massiaf Gyughe” [The Settlement of the Armenian Refugees in Syria, the Armenian Massiaf Village], *Husaber*, March 28, 1930, 1.

<sup>81</sup> We were unable to consult this article.

<sup>82</sup> “Haykakan Khndire” [The Armenian Issue], *Husaber*, February 4, 1930, 2.

potential danger.<sup>83</sup> The image of yesterday's poor refugee was replaced by the image of an individual with political ambitions for whom both the French and the Syrian nationalists had state-building projects.<sup>84</sup> Both needed the refugee population to advance their politics. Refugees had to choose, and by choosing one side, they ultimately gained the hatred of the other. The solution, thus, was not to choose one side but to overcome the situation without having to side with a single force.<sup>85</sup> *Arev*'s editors also called the attention of the Armenian leaders to the waves of anti-Armenian polemic which rose suddenly from time to time, often in less expected times, disappearing as suddenly as they had appeared. Many proofs supported the claim that such polemic was directed at the Armenians by hidden, secret hands. Often, the spark had been sources provided by so-called "friends" (the French?), who never hesitated to achieve their political ends at the expense of the Armenians.<sup>86</sup>

Other than the "Armenian home," other dangers were also discussed regularly in the French subsidized papers, for example, the separatist movement of Aleppo. At the beginning of 1930, *La Syrie*, another French subsidized paper, had published the announcement of Lavastre, the French delegate in Aleppo, that there was a strong separatist movement in Aleppo and that Ponsot was not against it. Such talks were intensified by Taj al-Din's visit to Beirut to meet Ponsot earlier that year.<sup>87</sup> All the papers in Syria and Lebanon debated the reasons behind such a meeting. Most papers were convinced that the main discussion topic was the separation of Aleppo.<sup>88</sup> As we know, the Armenians were also held responsible for the separatist aspirations of the Alepines.

The French authorities indeed circulated news of the "Armenian national home" in their subsidized papers in 1930 to achieve their own political goals. However, the story of the "Armenian national home" was not invented in 1930. Instead, the discussions went back to 1927, to the first coordinated refugee settlement efforts between the French mandatory authorities and the LoN. The contentious term "national home," was neither limited to the maneuvers of the French authorities nor the discussions in the Syrian nationalist press. The Armenian internal power struggle, as we shall see later, was also responsible for the circulation of the term.

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<sup>83</sup> "Ete Arden Ush Che... Surio Hay Gaghati Mej" [If It Is Not Too Late... in the Syrian Armenian Colony], *Arev*, February 7, 9, 1931, 1.

<sup>84</sup> This is the main argument of Veldkamp's thesis, see Joel Veldkamp, "Politics of Aleppo".

<sup>85</sup> "Ete arden ush che... Surio Hay Gaghati Mej" *Arev*, February 10, 1931, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> Taj al-Din al-Hasani was a French appointed leader. Between February 1928 and November 1931, he ruled Syria with three different cabinets.

<sup>88</sup> "Halepe Piti Anjatvi Suriayen" [Aleppo Shall Be Separated from Syria), *Yerevan*, February 27, 1930, 2.

### **April – May 1930 anti-Armenian propaganda and the Armenian response**

The scale of the April–May 1930 propaganda was such that the Armenian papers issued their responses one by one. Within just days, the official Armenian denunciations were published. *Azdak*, the ARF organ of Beirut, published a “response” to the accusations in Arabic and Armenian on May 15, 1930. The article claimed that the arrival of 500 Armenian families in Qamishli had raised much noise and anxiety in the Syrian press. Many articles were devoted to this immigration. The author divided these articles into two categories: analyses of the situation without hidden objectives or provocations; and those containing exaggerated news and even rumors to incite the Syrians against the Armenians. According to this last category, Armenians had been brought to Syria with the support of the French to build a new homeland; to this end, 1 million Armenians were expected. Le Nail had arrived in Syria with this aim and had many meetings in Beirut and Aleppo. All the leading politicians in Syria were busy with the Armenian issue and organizing boycotts. It was claimed that such an Armenian ingress was against Turkish wishes.

In the second part of the article, the author suggested an analysis of these accusations. It stated that everyone knew the reason for the situation was the Turkish deportations; Syria had been the logical destination as the neighboring country that had previously shown a warm welcome to the Armenian refugees. The regions where most of the newcomers were settled were far from the urban centers and had previously served as graveyards for thousands of Armenians during the genocide. Therefore, these could not be the preferred settlement sites for the Armenians. However, there were no alternatives since the Bolsheviks had closed the doors of their only legitimate homeland. No other empty lands were left in Syria or Lebanon, while Iraq had allocated lands to the Naher al-Omar refugees (in Mosul). Meanwhile, the number of Armenians on the lands stretching from Qamishli to Jarablus, over 500 kilometers, was no more than a few hundred houses, and the number of the newcomers did not exceed 2,500 persons. Could a new homeland be created out of this? The paper then concluded that the only Armenian homeland was the one known to everyone (Soviet Armenia) to which Armenians were eager to migrate and live happily once a democratic government had been established. On the other hand, those Armenians who had become Syrians and Lebanese were to serve their new homelands. The author then denied all the accusations one by one; Armenians had heard about the visit of Le Nail from the Syrian press. Le Nail did not bother to meet any Armenian representative during his stay. There were no additional 1 million Armenians anywhere to arrive

in Syria. Syria was no Palestine; Armenians were not Jews in the same way as Syria was not Turkey, and Syrians were not Mongols. The article concluded, “Armenians had no political goals in Syria.”<sup>89</sup>

It is noteworthy that, in its denial, the ARF took the opportunity to discredit all the other Armenian national bodies, both religious and lay, as well as the political parties since they had failed to denounce the angry publications. Moreover, it suggested its remedy to the crisis – interference by the mandatory authorities to end the polemic. Previously, this remedy had done more harm than good, only angering the Syrians even more. The fact that the paper blamed everyone but the ARF (believed guilty by all the other Armenian circles) outraged Mikayel Natanian, a Ramkavar leader.<sup>90</sup>

The Arabic language message of *Azdak* was duly reported to Paris along with its main messages.<sup>91</sup> A few days later, the French intelligence reported to Paris the joint declaration of the Henchak-Ramkavars, published on the front page of *Yeprat* on May 24, 1930.<sup>92</sup> It stated the usual message that the Armenians were *guests* in Syria and were grateful to both the mandatory power and the Syrian authorities. It went without saying that *guests* had neither the power nor the right to achieve political goals; thus, the Armenian home was purely imaginary. It hoped that the misunderstandings would be corrected soon. Finally, Armenians already had *a national home in Armenia*, while in Syria, they were busy gaining their daily bread.<sup>93</sup>

*Azdak*'s reaction to this announcement was categoric – “Armenians were not guests” (*Hayere hyur chen, Leisa al-Arman huna ghuraba*), its editorial announced once again in Armenian and Arabic on its front page on June 3, 1930. It first declared that their Arabic language publication had been important in clarifying the Armenian position. Then, it attacked the publications of certain “philosophers” who had declared that Armenians were *guests*, which did not correspond to reality. Armenians were by no means guests in Syria; before WWI, about 50,000 native Armenians had lived in Antioch, Suwayda, Alexandretta, Aleppo, Damascus, and Lebanon. Before WWI, Aleppo Armenians were even entitled to have their own deputy in the Ottoman parliament (Harut'yun Poshkezenian); another Lebanese deputy in the Ottoman parliament was also of Armenian origin (Abdallah Isagi), while his son, Adin Ishak, was one

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<sup>89</sup> “Mer Pataskhane” [ Our Response], *Azdak*, May 15, 1930, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Mikayel Natanian, “Hay-Arab Haraberutyunnere Surio Mej: Skhal Aghtajanutyun Me” [Armenian-Syrian Relations in Syria, A Wrong Diagnosis] I, *Yeprat*, April 30, 1930, 1.

<sup>91</sup> CADN-SL 575, Service de la presse, Note d’information N : 19, “Les arméniens en Syrie,” 16 mai 1930.

<sup>92</sup> CADN-SL 575, Renseignements politiques d’ordre confidentiel et destinés au Haut-Commissaire, article de propagande pro-arménienne du “Yeprat” du 24 mai 1930.

<sup>93</sup> Ramkavar and henchak political party Syrian administration, “Haytarautyun” [The Announcement of the Henchak and Ramkavar Syrian Administration], *Yeprat*, May 24, 1930, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

of the best-known literary figures in the whole of Syria. In fact, half the current Armenian population in Syria were native Armenians, while the other half had adopted local citizenship and were fully integrated; their participation in the elections and the allocated seats in Syria and Lebanon were proof. Armenians were a useful asset in trades and handicrafts, but especially in the development of agriculture, which was the country's future and where a special place was given to the cultivation of so-called special crops— cotton, tobacco, silk, in which many Armenians were specialists. Syrian nationalists, however, were worried and had declared many times their wish to assimilate the Armenians.<sup>94</sup>

Interestingly, another Syrian nationalist paper from Damascus, *Alef ba'*, came to the rescue of the Armenians. After printing the articles of *L'Orient* and *Fata al-Arab* side by side, the paper claimed that all the noise about the “Armenian national home” was pointless. They had double-checked it with the Armenian leaders as well as the French authorities. The new arrivals did not exceed 3,000; at the same time, more than 3,000 Armenians had left Syria. The news of the Armenian homeland in Jazira did not correspond to reality. The only wish of the Armenians was to improve their economic conditions, which also suited Syrian interests. Many rich Armenians, including the Armenian millionaires Gulbenkian and Nubar and other organizations, sent substantial funds to Syria to help these refugees by settling them in the agricultural colonies in Syria. These funds were spent in Syria.<sup>95</sup> *Alef-Ba'* also declared, “Today Armenians are loyal to our country; they have established good relations with the Syrians and wish to develop these relations even further.” The paper then praised the Armenians who had begun teaching Arabic in schools as the first foreign language. Before long, Armenians would become Arabs, understand Syrian inspirations better, and read local papers. In contrast to *Fata al-Arab*, the paper then mentioned how Armenian settlements were the best way to develop the Syrian Jazira by producing wheat as was done in Roman times.<sup>96</sup> The publications of *Alef Ba'* were important in the fight against anti-Armenian polemic. Was this another tactic to calm down the excesses of *L'Orient* and the resulting anti-Armenian polemic by reassuring the Syrian press of Damascus or the result of an investigation by *Alef Ba'*? The answer to this is not clear.

*Husaber*, in its turn, had a suggestion for combatting the anti-Armenian provocations; it was the establishment of Arabic language paper in Syria, the creation of closer ties with the

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<sup>94</sup> Edit., “Hayere Hyur Chen,” “Leisa al-ārman huna ghuraba” [Armenians - Not Guests], *Azduk*, June 3, 1930, 1.

<sup>95</sup> “Hayere Ogtakat en Ays Erkrin” [Armenians are Useful to This Country], *Husaber*, February 7, 1930, 2.

<sup>96</sup> CADN-SL 574, Articles de la presse, (Par un armenien), “Les Arméniens en Syrie ne veulent prendre la place de personne, ils demandent eux-mêmes à s’installer dans la Haute -Jazireh” [Armenians Wish to Replace No One : They Themselves Ask to Be Settled in the Upper Jazira], *L'Orient*, 25 decembre 1929.

locals instead of isolation as well as the establishment of Arab-Armenian clubs that would serve as meeting places for such rapprochement.<sup>97</sup> While another ARF organ from Beirut, *Azduk*, announced that, from now on, their paper had to serve as a bridge between the two peoples who spoke different languages. Syrians needed to know that the Armenians were there to support them and find a common solution to the economic difficulties and that Armenians could not have any political goals in Syria. The Armenian orientation was Syrian and the Lebanese and Syrians had to be reassured about this.<sup>98</sup>

Chapter I showed that the first articles about an alleged Armenian “national home” were published in the French-subsidized papers to divert the attention of the Syrian nationalists from the constitutional crisis. This was an effective method since the “Armenian national home” in the Syrian Jazira was an even greater danger to the construction of the Syrian state than the promulgation of the constitution. Once the constitution was promulgated, however, the perceived “dangers” of such a “national home” were to be downgraded by denouncing the news as mere rumors. However, this approach meant that the alleged “national home,” at least as a concept, would not disappear. On the contrary, various forces would use the same threat to further their aims, as the next chapters will reveal.

## **Chapter II: The Many Layers of the Armenian “National Home”**

This chapter aims to reveal the external factors and wider geopolitical events that gave the impression that an alleged “Armenian national home” was in the making in the Syrian Jazira. Among such important geopolitical events in the Middle East were the formation of the Kurdish organization Khoybun, the Ararat Kurdish rebellion, and the Khoybun-ARF cooperation. These events made the split within the Armenian community much deeper, given that each bloc gained a powerful external partner, making reconciliation impossible.

### **Khoybun and the “Armenian home”**

Was it a mere coincidence that, in May 1930, when the talks about the “Armenian home” were at their height, the Ararat uprising of the Kurds of Anatolia was taking a more serious turn?<sup>99</sup> *Husaber* devoted more and more articles to the “Kurdish movements,” reporting that Ankara had difficulties in controlling the rebellious regions and that the Kurds had refused Ankara’s

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<sup>97</sup> Editorial, “Menk ev Otare” [We and the Foreigners], *Husaber*, May 2, 1930, 1; Editorial, “Merdzetsumi Jampan” [The Path to Rapprochement], *Husaber*, May 22, 1930, 1.

<sup>98</sup> *Azduk*, May 24, 1930, “Arabahay Merdzetsum” [Armenian-Arab Rapprochement], *Husaber*, May 29, 1930, 1.

<sup>99</sup> More on the Ararat rebellion see Jordi Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde*, chapter V.

promises of positions, money, and even autonomy. In one of the articles, the role of Khoybun was particularly praised as the leading force of the uprising, whose popularity was rising daily among the Kurds.<sup>100</sup> The paper continued to report on the events in its next issues, usually on its front pages.<sup>101</sup> It also took the opportunity to condemn all the Armenian forces, especially those who were not communist but still anti-ARF, because of their careless publications and their anti-ARF stance in this critical moment when Kurds had revolted and while Turkish and Soviet agents worked tirelessly to transfer this Kurdish discontent out of Turkey to neighboring Iraq and Iran. The ARF was sure that, in this struggle, the Turks were greatly aided by their number one ally – Moscow.<sup>102</sup>

The *Husaber's* analysis of the friends and enemies of the Kurds was quite telling. One editorial stated that it was crucial to consider all the actors with interests in the Kurdish movement – Turkey, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, France, and Great Britain – to understand the importance of the movement. All the actors could be for or against the movement depending on the political circumstances. Turkey, for example, would support it if it was directed at Iraq or Iran. The opposite was also true. It was not possible to overlook its importance for the Armenians either. While ARF was openly sympathetic, as were certain independent Armenian press outlets (*Mshak* of Fresno Sep. 26, 1930, or *Le Foyer* of Paris), only the Ramkavars opposed it.<sup>103</sup> Moscow was, naturally, against it, furnishing their allies with military and logistical support to massacre the Kurds, as it had done previously to the Armenians.<sup>104</sup>

As the battles intensified in the Kurdish mountains in August 1930, *Yeprat*, the Rankavar paper of Aleppo, described the brutality of this life or death struggle.<sup>105</sup> It mentioned the uprising of Seikh Said, how the Kurds had lost and ceased their rebellion to gain more strength to revolt again in two years, which they did with greater organization, vigor, and courage. The author praised the Kurds who took radical actions without allowing their people to die slowly over 40 years, unlike the Armenian revolutionaries, who had been weak, disorganized, and ultimately disastrous for their people. Even if the revolt failed, the Kurds could be proud that they had tried everything in their power. The same was not true for the

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<sup>100</sup> “Kerdakan Jakati Vra” [On the Kurdish Front], *Husaber*, May 7, 1930, 1.

<sup>101</sup> “Kemali Erkire” [The Country of Kemal], *Husaber*, May 19, 1930, 1; “Mshtavar Henotse: Kerdakan Sharjunneri Artiv” [The Everlasting Fire: The Kurdish Movements], *Husaber*, May 21, 1930, 1.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Edit., “Kerdakan Sharjume ev Hay Joghovurde” [Kurdish Movement and the Arm], *Husaber*, April 7, 1931, 1.

<sup>104</sup> Editorial, “Moskvan ev Kurd Date” [Moscow and the Kurdish Cause], *Husaber*, April 10, 1931, 1.

<sup>105</sup> More on the military actions, see, Editorial, “Joghoverdi Het, Glukh Gikhi: Verlutsume Me” [With the People, Analyses], *Yeprat*, August 23, 1930, 1.



Armenian “saviors,” who, even 40 years later, still fought to determine *where was the homeland*, its borders, and their “orientation” – who was the enemy and who was the ally?<sup>106</sup>

*Yeprat* devoted a series of articles to condemning the ARF for their Khoybun adventure. They also called on the Armenians to be careful about aligning themselves with a single political party, which acted on their behalf without bothering to inform them and risked endangering the entire community. The people were guilty, too, for being utterly indifferent, for which they would ultimately pay the price.<sup>107</sup> The paper devoted several articles to the issue to warn the refugees and their political leaders that no Armenian force could allow itself to take sides; this struggle did not concern the Armenians. By doing so, they would not only earn the hatred of the Syrians and other host peoples but would also renew their hostilities with the Turks. It also condemned the public pro-Kurdish statements made by the ARF, who did not hesitate to employ all possible means to suppress the calls for caution from other groups. Some of the statements openly tied the Kurdish struggle to the Armenian one, considering it a new era in Armenian-Kurdish relations in which they were fighting a common enemy. Finally, it was also disturbing that the ARF considered the Kurds allies but continued its hostile stand toward Soviet Armenia. It was equally disturbing that the ARF and its actions were being taken as representative of the entire nation.<sup>108</sup> The ARF organs responded to such publications with strong criticism, announcing that such Armenian papers worked for the enemy for a payment.<sup>109</sup>

What was Khoybun, and how had it so enraged the non-ARF Armenian circles?<sup>110</sup> The story of this movement and the unusual alliance of the Kurds and ARF has already been told.<sup>111</sup> As described by historian Tejel, “Khoybun League was an ‘unnatural marriage’ between a Westernized intelligentsia and representatives of the traditional Kurdish world.”<sup>112</sup> In this alliance, intellectuals, ex-officers, aghas, shaykhs, and tribal leaders came together to work out

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<sup>106</sup> Cited in “Menk ev Anraget Tseghe” [We and the Illiterate Tribe], *Yeprat*, August 16, 1930, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Editorial, “Joghovirdin Het Glukh Glukhi: Ankhohem Gortsoghnerun en Khelatsi Angotsnerun Shurj” [With the People: About the Inappropriate Actors and the Smart Jobless], (a), *Yeprat*, August 6, 1930, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, August 9, 13, 20, 23, 1930, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Azdak, August 16, 1930, cited in editorial, “Kerdakan Sharjume ev Menk” [The Kurdish Movement and Us], *Yeprat*, September 3, 1930, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Khoybun [Xwebûn in Kurdish-Kurmanji lit. trans. as “Be yourself”] see in J. Tejel “The Last Ottoman Rogues: The Kurdish-Armenian Alliance in Syria and the New State System in the Interwar Middle East,” in *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empire*, ed., Ramazan Hakki Öztan and Alp Yenen, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 264.

<sup>111</sup> Jordi Tejel, “The Last Ottoman,” Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, chapters III, IV, V, VI ; Vahé Tachjian, “Le Khoyboun dans la Haute-Mésopotamie syrienne sous mandat français et le rapprochement kurdo-arménien,” *Etudes Kurdes*, N:6 (2004), Salih Akin et al., ed., “La Ligue Nationale Kurde Khoyboun : Mythes et réalités de la première organisation nationaliste kurde,” *Etudes Kurdes*, Hors série III (2007) ; Garabet K. Moundjian, “Armenian Involvement in the 1925 (Ararat) and 1937 (Dersim) Kurdish Rebellions in Republican Turkey: Mapping the Origins of Hidden Armenians,” *International Crimes and History*, vol. 19 (2018), 177–242.

<sup>112</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syrian’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Routledge: London and New York, 2009), 17.

a new nationalist movement to oppose the Kemalist regime.<sup>113</sup> The leaders of the refugee Kurdish tribes in Syria were especially targeted for Khoybun's propaganda. The geographical scope of its activities was initially limited to the Kharput-Bitlis-Botan region, with some attempts to expand toward Sulaymaniyya and Baghdad in Iraq.<sup>114</sup> From the beginning, Khoybun's important meetings were attended by the leading ARF representatives.<sup>115</sup> According to Tejel, their alliance was sealed by a treaty signed in Beirut in October 1927, when the sides had agreed to recognize the right to independence for an independent Kurdistan and a United Armenia, for which the borders were to be determined later.<sup>116</sup> Tejel explains that the French mandatory authorities followed closely the activities of the Khoybun, whose activity center was located in the mandated territories.<sup>117</sup> Such an organization proved useful even for the French, as was evident, especially during the Franco-Turkish negotiations on the delimitation of the Syrian-Turkish border.<sup>118</sup> French mandatory records, therefore, contain interesting insights into the activities of the Armenian-Kurdish alliance. The French believed that the ARF had provided substantial financial support, for the economic conditions of the Kurdish tribes were poor.<sup>119</sup> One such intelligence report claimed that ARF had contributed 30,000 francs to Khoybun.<sup>120</sup> Another report explained that ARF's generous support was aimed at achieving the annexation of Van, Erzurum, and Bayazed in order to settle the Armenian refugees there as an independent entity from Soviet Armenia.<sup>121</sup>

What worried the French was undoubtedly the alleged British connection in the form of undercover financial support to this alliance. Moreover, Matossian, a major Armenian tobacco company from British-controlled Egypt had opened branches in Syria and Lebanon to provide cover for many Khoybun members.<sup>122</sup> According to Tejel, the French at first did not undertake

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<sup>113</sup> Its founders were Jaladat, Kamuran and Sureya Badirkhan brothers, Memduh Selim, Mehmed Chukru Sekban, Ihsan Nouri, Amin Raman, Bozan, Mustafa Shahin and others. See in Jordi Tejel, *Syria's*, fn, 19, 144.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>115</sup> The first congress held in Bihamdun was attended by Vahan Papazian in the spring of 1927, while the Aleppo congress of March 1928 by Papazian and Atur Levonian, see in Jordi Tejel, "The Last Ottoman Rogues," 365.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*; see also Hamit Bozarslan, "Histoire des relations kurdo-arméniennes," in *Kurdistan und Europa*, ed., Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zurich: Chronos, 1997), 182–186.

<sup>117</sup> In 1927, Ihsan al-Nuri, an ex-Ottoman officer, was named as the Commander in General of the Kurdish forces and was sent to Ararat. However, the Turkish offensive of 1930 coupled with the hostile USSR and Iran attitude drove Nuri to surrender. Tejel, *Syria's*, fn. 23, 144; Tejel, "The Last Ottoman Rogues," 369, 377.

<sup>118</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 19.

<sup>119</sup> CADN-SL 574, Sûreté Aleppo, "Trafic d'armes et de mutitions," 12 janvier 1931; CADN-SL 574, Ponsot, Le Haut Commissaire de la R.F. à Son Excellence Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, 26 mars 1931.

<sup>120</sup> Tejel provided another amount 20,000 citing British sources, see TNA air 23/407, Air Staff Intelligence, Baghdad 25 May 1928, 4 November 1928, cited in Jordi Tejel "The Last Ottoman Rogues," 374.

<sup>121</sup> CADN-SL 574, Le Chef de Poste de Djéرابلس à Chef de la Sûreté Générale du vilayet d'Alep, 25 août 1931.

<sup>122</sup> On Matossian company see Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie : aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak, 1919-1933* (Paris: Karthala, 2004), 88; also "Matossian-Ipekian Gortsarane ev Hayere" [Matossian-Ipekian Factory and the Armenians], *Lebanon*, August 9, 1930, 3.

any drastic measures against the alliance, which was to change radically after July 1930, when a planned Khoybun expedition to Turkey failed. After this event, the French began to expel Khoybun members from the border regions, putting some of them under house arrest, and, in the case of Vahan Papazian, denying entrance to Syria.<sup>123</sup>

Instead of ARF, the term “Yerevan government” was usually used in these intelligence documents. The so-called “Yerevan government” was, in fact, the exiled former ARF government of the First Armenian Republic. It meant that the “exiled government” not only continued to exist more than 10 years after the fall of their rule in Armenia (December 1920) but continued to sign agreements pledging their support to some major state-building projects regarding not only the Armenian refugees but also the Armenians of Soviet Armenia, whom they did not represent. The activities of ARF and the circulation of the term “Yerevan government” inevitably brought new players to the stage, the USSR and Soviet Armenia, both of whom feared that a secret plot was being created by their enemies – the ARF and the imperialists (British and French). All their enemies had joined the forces that were potentially deadly for Soviet rule. Their fears doubled when Khoybun’s activity center was transferred from Beirut and Aleppo to the Syrian Jazira. Indeed, French intelligence reports sent regularly from Qamishli or Hassake reported details about their activities.<sup>124</sup>

What worried the Soviets, on the other hand, were the alleged ARF-Kurdish-imperialist connections. Did this ARF-Khoybun connection possibly impact the circulation of the news of the alleged Armenian “national home,” and if yes, why and how? Could Soviet uneasiness about this cooperation create an anti-Armenian polemic in Syria? In the following chapters, we shall aim to reveal the external dimensions of the “national home.”

### **ARF-Khoybun alliance and the “Armenian home”**

The Armenians of Syria first learned about Khoybun from the pages of *Fata al-Arab*, which was translated and cited entirely in *Yeprat* in April 1928 as a denunciation of 20 Kurdish chiefs of the rival Ta’al party. The latter condemned the formation of Khoybun, which they accused of being entirely ARF-inspired and striving to reconquer the lands of Eastern Anatolia at the expense of the Kurds.<sup>125</sup> The idea of Khoybun was so shocking for the editors of *Yeprat* that

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<sup>123</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s*, fn. 23, 144; Tejel “The Last Ottoman Rogues,” 377.

<sup>124</sup> On French intelligence reports about Khoybun activities in the Syrian Jazira, see the folder CADN-SL: 574.

<sup>125</sup> *Fata’ al-Arab*, April 6, cited in “Anhavatali Hekiat Me” [An Unbelievable Legend], *Yeprat*, May 12, 1928, 2.

they hoped that ARF's denial would be imminent for it was impossible that ARF could risk the lives of the remaining Armenians in Turkey through such adventures.<sup>126</sup>

However, merely one year later, the editors of *Yeprat* themselves were convinced, to their horror, that the ARF-Kurdish cooperation was a reality. There was too much evidence, the obvious Kurdish orientation of the ARF, a speech devoted to Khoybun by Enkurd bey in ARF's Aleppo club, the open pro-Kurdish declarations of the ARF leading figures, the recent announcement of the ARF program adopted in the 11<sup>th</sup> General Congress, the denunciations of the Ta'ali Kurdish party and, finally, the oral stories of the recently deported Armenians from Turkey. *Yeprat* believed that ARF-Kurdish cooperation had provoked the recent Armenian deportations, for these people had neither properties nor lands; they were the poorest.<sup>127</sup> Similar claims were also put forward by the Soviet Armenian leaders, as we shall see later.

The suspicions of the Ramkavars seemed to be confirmed when on March 18, 1930, a "Call to the Armenians" was published in the pages of *Husaber* on behalf of the Armenian Central Refugee Support Committee (*gaghtakanakan kendronakan khnamatarut'yun*) signed by Sahak II. The call provided a background for the recent Armenian refugee flow from Turkey, tracing its timing back to the spring of 1929 when about 150 primarily Kurdish-speaking Armenian families had fled Turkey from the rural regions of Diyarbekir. The call considered the newcomers *liberated* considering their previous conditions in Turkey and stated that bringing the remaining Armenians of Turkey was also necessary, thus liberating them from their captivity. The call, which was an appeal for more financial support, concluded by mentioning the sympathetic and supportive attitude of both the Syrian and French authorities. It declared that the newcomers would not be a burden on anyone; instead, they were to become useful elements enriching the Syrian economy.<sup>128</sup> *Yeprat* did not believe in the authenticity of the call, especially its open appeal to leave Turkey and for the people who had arrived to bring their relatives as soon as possible.

Two weeks before the publication of this "Call," *Al-Ahwal's* correspondent in Aleppo had already summarized most of the ideas published in the "Call" that reported a "secret Armenian homeland in northern Syria." According to *Al-Ahwal*, the Armenians were being supported by charity organizations to establish a homeland in secret. The paper claimed that the central figure

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<sup>126</sup> More on the ARF attitude toward the Kurdish revolts from the ARF perspective, see Karo Sasuni, *Kurd Azatagrakan Sharjume ev Hay-Kerdakan Haraberutyunnere* [The Kurdish National Movements and the Armenian-Kurdish Relations] (Beirut, 1969). Also the ARF Central archives were several boxes are devoted to it.

<sup>127</sup> Editorial, "Arkatsakhndrinere: Verjin Bernagaghtin Arjev" [The Adventurers: The Recent Deportations], *Yeprat*, November 9, 1929, 1.

<sup>128</sup> Sahak II, "Koch Hayutyan" [Call to the Armenians], *Husaber*, March 18, 1930, 1.

in this affair was the Armenian-aged Catholicos, who coordinated everything. In this affair, all the Armenians, including the Catholics and the Protestants, acted in unity. Moreover, Armenian religious heads worked tirelessly to bring the remaining Armenians from Turkey. This was largely successful since thousands of Armenians arrived, all of whom were sheltered in the Armenian churches, receiving money and lands. All the new arrivals received local identity cards, too. There was no doubt that the Armenians were preparing for the next elections to claim more seats for themselves since the government facilitated their acquisition of local citizenship. The funds arrived from everywhere, but especially from Egypt. Armenians had asked the Matossian tobacco giant to open branches in Aleppo and Beirut, a move that had been promised to them. This was not all; during the Sunday prayers, refugees were encouraged to bring their relatives who were still in Turkey as soon as possible. Moreover, the Armenians acted in unity with other Christians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans.<sup>129</sup>

ARF organ *Husaber* attributed the source of such claims to Turkey, reminding its readers of all the former plots as well as new ones, which had the same objective – to expel Armenians from Syria.<sup>130</sup> The author also blamed all the Armenian national bodies and the internal chaos for the ongoing anti-Armenian polemic because of the national organizations' inability to deny it in an efficient and timely manner.<sup>131</sup> Natanian found it immoral to hide one's own misdoings while criticizing others, as it was immoral to blame the Turkish propaganda for everything. Finally, Jamalian (a leading ARF member) proudly and openly praised the cooperation with the Kurds (Khoybun), announcing that this collaboration had saved the remaining Armenians from hell and would rescue the others too. Natanian wondered why the ARF press found it strange that after the ARF had given all the grounds, the Turks had been able to use these declarations to not only get rid of their remaining Armenian populations but also to turn Syrian opinion against the Armenians.<sup>132</sup> Natanian urged, naturally, all the Armenian circles to deny the news of the "national home" immediately and publicly. He also highlighted how inappropriate had been the comparisons with the Jewish home.<sup>133</sup> In the last article in this series, Natanian called on the ARF to refrain from its Khoybun adventure and publish official denunciations.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> *Al-Ahwal*, March 7, 1930, cited in "Hakahay Hratarakutyun, Hyusisi Mej Hayeru Gaghtni Hayrenike" [Anti-Armenian Article: Armenian Secret Homeland in the North], *Husaber*, March 11, 1930, 2.

<sup>130</sup> Arshakuni, "Hayeru Gaghtni Hayrenike: Azgayin Hastatutyunneru Pataskhanatvutyune" [The Armenian Secret Homeland: The Responsibility of the National Institutions], (a), *Husaber*, 3 April 1930, 1.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, II, *Husaber*, April 4, 1930, 1.

<sup>132</sup> M. Natanian, "Hay-Arab Haraberutyunnere Surio Mej: Skhal Aghtajanutyun Me" [Armenian-Syrian Relations in Syria, A Wrong Diagnosis], (a), *Yeprat*, April 30, 1930, 1.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, II May 7, 1930, 1.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, May 10, 1930, 1.

The publication of anti-Armenian material in *Al-Ahwal* and *Al-Ahrar* was no accident. In fact, many anti-Armenian articles were first printed in these two papers as rumors before being widely disseminated in all the other papers of Syria and Lebanon. Both papers appeared to have valuable sources of information for their articles. The Turkish press was surely one, but not the only one. Other kinds of connections were central, especially the communist one. Tellingly, one of the editors of *Al-Ahrar* was Yusef Yuzbek, a young journalist with close ties to Moscow. *Al-Ahrar* was increasingly used as a stage to denounce ARF, their malicious activities, and their imperial connections.

Such connections are crucial for understanding why certain articles on the Armenians were printed in these two papers.<sup>135</sup> The timing and the overall geopolitical context each time must be considered.

### **The inter-Armenian struggle behind the anti-Armenian polemic?**

Meanwhile, Kurdo-Armenian cooperation was also being discussed actively in the Syrian press in a different light. According to *Al-Qabas*, Armenians were outraged by the Turkish-French decision to avoid discussing the issue of the Armenian abandoned properties, as suggested by Turkey. Moreover, the Armenians had hoped that if the Turkish-French negotiations failed, France would be willing to arm them and encourage incursions into Turkish territory and would also be willing to allocate lands in northern Syria.<sup>136</sup> Thus, ARF-Kurdish cooperation was intended to hinder the conclusion of the Turkish-French agreement regarding the delimitation of the borders and the compensation for the lost properties of the Syrians in Turkey. *Husaber* again saw behind these articles the hidden hands of Ankara and Moscow. Moreover, *Husaber* was furious that the Armenian Ramkavar *Yeprat* of Aleppo was similarly favoring the enemies. It even asked whether there was a connection between *Yeprat*'s and *Al-Qabas*'s publications and whether both did not receive their instructions from the same center – Ankara. The reason for such an accusation against *Yeprat* was its latest article about the arrival of famous ARF leaders in Aleppo (Aghbalian, Shant, Koms), the expected visit of others (Ruben Ter-Minassian), and the leaders of Khoybun for a secret meeting.<sup>137</sup> Although the ARF organs had

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<sup>135</sup> I have been unable to trace a connection between *Al-Ahwal* and the communists, but because of the nature of the printed articles, I have assumed that these two papers cooperated closely.

<sup>136</sup> Cited in “Enkyurii Gortsakalneru Hakahay Gergerutyunnere” [The Anti-Armenian Propaganda by Anakara’s Agents], *Husaber*, April 28, 1930, 2.

<sup>137</sup> *Yeprat*, April 19, 1930, cited in “Hay Provokatsionnere” [The Armenian Provocations], *Husaber*, April 28, 1930, 2. We have been unable to find the cited original *Yeprat* article in our collection of *Yeprat*.

publicly denied this news, nevertheless, the title of another ARF organ *Azduk* of Beirut “Espionage or betrayal?” indicated that such a meeting might have well happened in Aleppo.<sup>138</sup>

What was deplorable for *Husaber* was the fact that certain Armenian papers, including *Yeprat*, unwittingly served the Soviet and Turkish interests by publishing wrong but provocative articles.<sup>139</sup> The ARF members did not restrain their anger with respect to these publications; Dr. Khachik Poghosian, *Yeprat*’s editor, was beaten publicly and severely twice in Aleppo.<sup>140</sup>

The response of *Yeprat* to these accusations was unexpected; a few days later, its editors addressed their “Honest words” to *Al-Qabas*, initiating cooperation. They first thanked *Azduk* for becoming the reason for establishing a dialogue with *Al-Qabas*; next, the paper took the opportunity to condemn *Al-Qabas*’s previous anti-Armenian announcements. According to *Yeprat*, such declarations sprang from patriotic feelings and the perceived dangers. The paper then assured the Syrians that the Armenians had come unwillingly but were ready to leave for their *homeland* as soon as possible. The Armenians were *guests*, and there was no reason to fear them. The paper did not forget to praise Syrian hospitality.<sup>141</sup> The Syrians were assured about the impossibility of creating any “Armenian home,” which neither the Armenians nor the mandatory authorities were striving to achieve.<sup>142</sup>

*Yeprat*’s editors also condemned Khoybun; its editors asked the Syrians to refrain from attributing the actions of particular individuals to the entire community. Such was the attitude of the Armenians, who respected all the Syrians regardless of their different political views. Finally, it had been the advice of Shukri pasha, the governor of Aleppo to the Armenians, 11 years ago.<sup>143</sup>

*Husaber*, on the other hand, was more explicit in its follow-up article that Moscow and Ankara were to blame for the ongoing anti-Armenian provocations, which at times took a sharper and more critical turn, as happened in April – May 1930. According to the paper, neither the Syrian people nor the Syrian or French authorities had anything to do with these events. Such provocations would only cease once Moscow and Ankara had stopped their pretensions in Syria. To prove that Moscow was indeed involved, the paper mentioned how the Arab

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<sup>138</sup> “Lertesutyun Te Matnutyun” [Espionage or Betrayal], *Azduk*, April 26, 1930, cited in *ibid*.

<sup>139</sup> Editorial, “Gortsi: Al-Qabas-nern u Yeprat- nere Dzerk-Dzerki” [To Action: Al-Qabas – es and Yeprat-s Hand in Hand], *Husaber*, April 29, 1930, 1.

<sup>140</sup> “Ov E Hantsavore?” [Who is Guilty?], *Husaber*, May 22, 1930, 2.

<sup>141</sup> Editorial, “Ankeghts Khosker Damaskosi *Al-Qabas*-in” [Honest Words to the Damascene *Al-Qabas*], *Yeprat*, May 14, 1930, 1.

<sup>142</sup> Editorial, “Ankeghts Khosker Surio Arab Mamulin” [Honest Words to the Syrian Arab Press], *Yeprat*, May 17, 1930, 1.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, May 21, 1930, 1.

language press had previously been flooded with articles after the murder of Sargis Tkhruni and the murder attempt against Aghazarian, both of whom were prominent Henschak leaders in Syria, famous for their pro-Soviet attitude.<sup>144</sup> These accusations were not entirely misplaced. Indeed, ample evidence shows that a substantial part of the anti-Armenian polemic in the Syrian press was the direct result of the violent rivalry between two Armenian blocs – the ARF on the one hand and pro-Soviet forces (Henschaks, Ramkavars, and communists) on the other. For example, after the murder of Sargis Tkhruni, perpetrated by the ARF members, the Armenian communists arranged through Fuad Shimali and journalist Fuad Midani that the news of the murder with all its details should be widely published in the Syrian and Lebanese Arabic language press. As explained by Madoyan, *Ahrar* continued its systematic campaign against the ARF through Yusef Yuzbek.<sup>145</sup> As for the failed murder attempt against Aghazarian, Armenian communists organized a widespread press campaign “against the ARF, the perpetrators of the crime.”<sup>146</sup>

There is no doubt that both the Syrian and Lebanese press devoted much attention to the political assassinations in the two Armenian rival blocs, not because they were incited by Moscow but because these killings were happening in the streets of Beirut during the daytime. The Syrian press outlets did not only report on the events but also used the opportunity to call on the local and mandatory authorities to forbid the activities of the Armenian political parties that had become a major political challenge for Syria. The *Al-Sha‘b* article reporting the murder of Sargis Tkhruni had the following telling title “Syria between Dashnaks (ARF) and Turks.”<sup>147</sup>

The unsuccessful murder attempt against Aghazarian and the press coverage it received in the local Syrian and Lebanese press were telling. In the papers, the reason behind the animosity between the two Armenian political parties was presented in the light of Armenian-Syrian relations. For example, *Al-Sharq* of Beirut and *Sada al-Shamal* of Tripoli had claimed that the main cause had been the ARF’s wish to turn the Armenian refugees against their hosts.<sup>148</sup> Similar interpretations were also printed in the Syrian press; for example, *Al-Istiklal* of Damascus had explained to its readers that Aghazarian wished to align the refugees politically

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<sup>144</sup> Sargis Tkhruni, a leading henschak activist, and the editor of the *Suriakan Mamul*, was arrested and kept on Arwald irland during the Syrian Revolt. After his release in 1928 he moved to Beirut. He was killed on 17 January 1929. Mihran Aghazarian was another prominent Henschak. In 1926 he was elected to the Armenian provincial body in Beirut. He was the editor of *Lebanon* and later *Joghovurd*. ARF blamed Aghazarian for the murderer of Vardapetian and a long trial run in Beirut where he was finally vindicated. In August 1928 an unsuccessful murder attempt was done against him. He was murdered in Beirut on 11 October 1933.

<sup>145</sup> Harutyun Madoyan, *Kyank Me Patneshi Vra, Husher ev Vkayutyunner* (Beirut, 1988), 114.

<sup>146</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 115.

<sup>147</sup> “Süriyä Bāyna al-ṭāshnāq wa alātrāk” [Syria between Dashnaks and Turks], *Al-Sha‘b*, March 29, 1929, 1.

<sup>148</sup> *Al-Sharq*, August 8, 1928, cited in Natanian, “Tsanot Mahapordzin Khndire ev Hay-Siriakan Haraberutyunnere” [The Issue of the Murder Attempt and the Armenian-Syrian Relations], *Yeprat*, October 3, 1928, 1.



and economically with the interests of their hosts, while the rival political party (ARF) was against this. The paper also praised Aghazaryan for his courage and friendly attitude towards the locals; by contrast, it lamented the “aggressive attitude of the Dashnaks and called the local authorities to annihilate that dangerous microbe.”<sup>149</sup>

Clearly, the Armenian communists and Henschaks had used the opportunity to attack ARF in the foreign press, turning the initial internal affair into an issue of Armenian-Syrian relations. We learn from Natanian’s article that the ARF had previously used such a strategy in Alexandria, Egypt, to fight against its political opponents – Henschaks and Ramkavars – by denouncing them in the local Arabic press as communists.<sup>150</sup> There was no doubt that Syrian and Lebanese press outlets were informed about the incidents happening in the Armenian community by Armenians themselves. Sometimes, these papers even mentioned specifically “transmitted by an Armenian informant.” Thus, increasingly, certain Syrian outlets had regular Armenian informants who belonged to a political party with the same views. *Al-Ahrar*, for example, was close to the Armenian communists and Henschaks and was used to expose the ARF systematically. Crucially, in the pages of *Al-Ahrar*, ARF was usually presented as “Armenians,” thus implying that it encompassed the entire refugee community and not just one bloc of it. This, in its turn, was another cause of a fight. While ARF organs occasionally took the floor to defend themselves, they rarely did so when the articles mentioned “Armenians” rather than “ARF”.<sup>151</sup>

To make matters worse, once such critical articles appeared in the Syrian press, the rival Armenian bloc used the opportunity to thank the Syrian outlet for exposing the other side, confirming their wrongdoings or the dangerous character of the rival party. For example, on January 26, 1929, *Al-Sha‘b* published an article complaining that “Dashnaks disturbed the public order in the country; why are Armenians even allowed to have political parties?”<sup>152</sup> the Henschaks used this opportunity to blackmail the ARF even further. Four days later, *Al-Sha‘b* reported that, in response to its previous articles about Dashnaks, Armenian youth had expressed their gratitude for the articles exposing the Dashnaks because they would help strengthen relations between the Armenians and the Syrian nation.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> *Al-Istiklal*, August 5, 1928, cited in *ibid*.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>151</sup> Editorial, “*Al-Ahrar*-I Ambastanutyunnere” [The Accusations of *Al-Ahrar*], *Yeprat*, November 18, 1928, 1.

<sup>152</sup> “Al-ṭasnāq al-ārman yaqlukèuna alblād” [Dashnak Armenians Disturb the Country], *Al-Sha‘b*, January 26, 1929, 1.

<sup>153</sup> “Alshabība al-ārmaniya tashkuru al-sūriyin” [The Armenian Youth Expresses Gratitude to the Syrians], *Al-Sha‘b*, January 30, 1929, 1.

Obviously, the internal struggle of the two Armenian rival blocs had transcended the boundaries of the Armenian community long ago and was now being waged in the Arabic language press. As explained in Part III, the fact that the core members of the communist sympathizers were composed primarily of journalists only facilitated this new trend. *Al-Ahrar* was by no means the only paper attacking the ARF, *Al-Ahwal* was another. In December 1929, Fuad al-Shimali became the editor of the *Al-Ummal* (Workers). When the paper was shut down by the French authorities, it resurfaced as *Saut al-Ummal* (The Voice of the Workers) in March 1930, once again under the direction of Fuad al-Shimali.

There was, however, another external layer in the communist-ARF struggle in Syria and Lebanon. The propaganda campaigns were mainly fed and manipulated by the two powerful external players – the USSR and Turkey – who also fought the ARF. Moreover, their efforts were not only directed at the ARF but fed the anti-Armenian polemic in general. Before discussing the role of these powerful players in-depth, we shall briefly explain the revival of the communist cells in Syria.

### **Revival of the communist cells in Syria and Lebanon and the Armenians**

At the end of the 1920s, the confrontation between two rival Armenian blocs had many more layers due to the ongoing Kurdish rebellion and the renewed Soviet Armenia - ARF confrontation, which had the most impact on Syria and Lebanon. Meanwhile, both Syrian and Armenian communist leaders benefited from the amnesty of 1928 and returned from exile. Immediately Haykazun Boyajyan was transferred to Damascus to renew the contacts with the Syrian communists and recruit new members. These efforts had paid off quickly, and new Armenian and Arab members had joined them by 1930, among them being Khaled Bakdash.<sup>154</sup> This notwithstanding, the most active communist center was not Damascus but Tripoli, Zahle, and Bikfaya – all of them in Lebanon.

In mid-1928, Fuad Shimali had managed to leave for Moscow to participate in the Comintern's 6<sup>th</sup> Congress, while, in 1929, Berker visited Beirut for the second time. Another high-ranking activist, Nachman Litvenskiy, was transferred from Palestine to Beirut.<sup>155</sup> Communists also successfully used the local provincial elections (for example, in Bikfaya in 1929) to push their own candidates with a program advocating the liberty to have syndicates, better working conditions, higher salaries, and labor law. Moreover, the party decided it was

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<sup>154</sup> Khaled Bekdash became the political secretary of the communist party of Damascus at the beginning of 1931.

<sup>155</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 109-110.

time to act openly and publicly in the party congress of 1930.<sup>156</sup> The official announcement of the party, signed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon, was printed and distributed in June 1930 in both Syria and Lebanon. Once again, it did not refer to any communist doctrines, instead demanding independence, democratic liberties, fundamental freedoms, and better working conditions. The only demand with some communist overtones was the one asking for a government run by the workers and the peasants. Another important decision taken in this Congress was to support the liberation movement of Syria, which was taking a new shape.<sup>157</sup> At the end of the 1920s, numerous strikes were also organized in both Syria and Lebanon by the small local industries, which had been hit badly by the deepening world depression. At the end of 1930, a tobacco workers' strike in Lebanon and a local textile industry strike against low tariffs for Japanese imports in Syria were organized and mobilized by the Syrian and Armenian communists.<sup>158</sup> A year later, much wider-scale demonstrations were organized in addition to demonstrations against the tobacco Régie, and the increased prices of electricity and transport; all of these protests were actively mobilized by the communists.

Unsurprisingly, both Syrian and Armenian communists were actively “hunted” during this period. This encouraged the Syrian press to accuse all Armenians of being Bolsheviks. Once again, the Syrian press tended to use the news of the arrests to claim that all those arrested were Armenians. One example was the arrests of communists in the summer of 1930 in Aleppo during the distribution of communist tracts. While there were a few Armenians among the arrested, the majority were Syrian. The irony of this was the fact that the Arabization of the communist party had already started, and while there were still a few Armenians, the vast majority were Syrians.<sup>159</sup>

Such accusations in the Syrian press also renewed the Armenian's internal grievances. *Yeprat*, for example, sought to defend the refugees against such accusations, claiming that the communist orientation of the Armenian youth had been the direct result of the ARF-run fierce struggle against Soviet Armenia. Their tireless propaganda and publications had made anti-

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<sup>156</sup> The new central body elected during this Congress included four Syrians (Fuad Shimali, Nakhman Listwenskiy, Naser Hedde, Nazmi Ri'fai) and three Armenians (Artin Madoyan, Haykazun Boyajian, Hakob Ter Petrossian), see in Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 120.

<sup>157</sup> Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 120.

<sup>158</sup> Ramazan Hakki Öztan, “The Last Ottoman Merchants: Regional Trade and Politics of Tariffs in Aleppo's Hinterland, 1921-1929,” in *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946*, ed., Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 319-350.

<sup>159</sup> The Arabization of the party neither happened overnight nor smoothly. It created many tensions among the Syrians and Armenians. The latter who had suffered because of their activities accumulating experience were reluctant to cede their place to the former who were recruited in the leading roles. The tensions lasted between 1931 and 1933 and were over by the intervention of Comintern. Madoyan, *Kyank Me*, 125-126, 141-143.

ARF forces look for other alliances and eventually become communists. It was known that the communist movement among the Armenians abroad was quite “national.” Its aim was not the class struggle but to encourage sympathy for Soviet Armenia. According to *Yeprat*, as soon as ARF ceased its anti-Soviet propaganda, the others would not have any reason to take a pro-Soviet Armenian, thus communist, stance.<sup>160</sup>

Once again, each Armenian bloc provided information to the Syrian papers to denounce the other. For example, the Henschak leader Aghazarian from Beirut informed *Al-Ahd al-Jadid* about an upcoming ARF-Kurdish congress under the presidency of Vahan Papazian, which many Syrian newspapers reported equally. Even the intelligence officer lamented that all the Syrian papers showed great interest in any news concerning the Armenians, usually publishing it in anti-Armenian terms. The news of this congress was not missed by a single Syrian and Lebanese press organ.<sup>161</sup> As a response, ARF appealed to the French mandatory authorities, asking them not to extend the same kind of French protection to all the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon; Armenian Bolsheviks, for instance, should be excluded.<sup>162</sup> The French agreed that, while Syrians accused Armenian refugees of having imported communism into Syria; in reality, there were just a few Armenian communists. However, this minority had been enough to spread the ideology throughout the entire community.<sup>163</sup>

In this regard, the Ramkavar organ *Arev* claimed that the so-called “red danger,” the claims that Armenian refugees were overwhelmingly communist and risked spreading communism in the countries under the mandate, were wildly exaggerated by the ARF, French mandatory authorities, and Syrian nationalists. It was claimed that Armenian refugees were public threats, with the community having as many as 200 active communist members. After each such campaign, arrests followed. However, after arresting the usual suspects, who were all well known for their activities and usually not persecuted, it was announced that the number of communists did not exceed 25–30 persons. *Arev*'s editors lamented that the polemic and the arrests could almost always be traced to the same anti-communist Armenian bloc (ARF). By this behavior, ARF fought their political rivals without considering that the entire Armenian community was compromised in the eyes of the Syrians. In Syria and Lebanon, any Armenian

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<sup>160</sup> Editorial, “Surio ev Libanani Hay Hamaynavarnere” [The Armenian Communists of Syria], *Yeprat*, August 16, 1930, 1.

<sup>161</sup> CADN-SL 2387, Sûreté Alep, “Comites Arméniens,” N: 2301, Beyrouth, 20 septembre 1930.

<sup>162</sup> CADN- SL 2387, Inspecteur administrative de la Bekaa à le Haut Commissaire, Zahle, 25 avril 1930; Sûreté général, N: 202, Aleppo ; Sûreté général, N: 202, Aleppo.

<sup>163</sup> CADN-SL 574, de Martel, L'ambassadeur de France, Haut Commissaire de la R.F. en Syrie et au Liban à Monsieur le délégué du Haut Commissaire d'après du gouvernement du Djebel Druze, “Note sur les questions arméniennes dans les Etats sous mandate français,” Beyrouth, 26 novembre 1935.

could be easily blamed for being a communist, persecuted, and jailed. The tactic was the same as that used in Ottoman times to accuse the “Komitajis.” Nowadays, ARF waged a “national struggle” against 25–30 Armenian communists. In the same way, Armenians had been unable to unite against accusations about their secret plans to establish a “national home” in Syria. Once again, they were divided into two rival blocs, each of which nourished the claims of the foreigners blackmailing the rival Armenian bloc by all possible means. This, of course, did not help them to counteract the accusations; instead, it widened the abyss between them even further. Moreover, it had made foreigners, including the Syrian hosts, suspicious of the Armenian community. This deplorable form of politics not only pitted one Armenian community against the other but also alienated the foreigners (hosts), who did not care to make a distinction between the ARF and non-ARF Armenians.<sup>164</sup>

Amid the anti-Armenian polemic, even Syrian papers known for their pro-refugee stance, such as the Alepine *Al-Taqaddum* had started to report about a “Bolshevik center in Syria established by the Armenians.” *Al-Taqaddum* reported the arrests of Armenian communists in Aleppo who distributed communist fliers exposing Syria to the dangers of Bolshevik revolutions. It also took the opportunity to suggest that the local government tighten their control over the Armenian refugees even further, introduce restrictions, and reduce their numbers.<sup>165</sup> *Al-Taqaddum*'s editorial was quickly reprinted in all major Syrian and Lebanese papers, once again showing Armenians to be dangerous to the public order. The article continued to be spread even though, two days later, it was known that three persons out of the arrested four were released, while the confiscated stamps belonged to the Henschaks. What is more, the only detained person, a certain Tovmas, insisted that it was the police who had put a Bolshevik tract among his papers.<sup>166</sup>

According to *Arev*, many anti-Armenian articles provided by the ARF were first published in the Syrian and Lebanese press. These articles were later translated and cited in the ARF organs to show the refugees what the foreigners thought about Armenians. What *Arev* found suspicious was the fact that all these articles favored the ARF position and exposed the anti-ARF Armenian bloc. Among the most telling examples were the articles published to report the assassination and burial ceremony of Aghazarian, a famous Henschak leader, in Lebanon's Arabic and French language press. It reported that “about 2000 Armenians, exclusively

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<sup>164</sup> “Ete Arden Ush Che... Surio Hay Gaghuti Mej” [If It Is Not Too Late for the Armenian Colony in Syria], *Arev*, February 10, 1931, 1.

<sup>165</sup> Editorial, *Al-Taqaddum*, August 25, 1930, cited in *Yeprat*, September 3, 1930, 1, 4.

<sup>166</sup> Editorial, “Patashkane me *Al-Taqaddumin*” [A Response to *Al-Taqaddum*], *Yeprat*, September 6, 1930, 1.

communists, who had red flags in their hands, had attended the ceremony, singing the hymn of the International and trying to attack the government building. Fortunately, the police had interfered on time.”<sup>167</sup> Similar press campaigns were conducted for all possible occasions. Communists, in their turn, used the same strategy as far as we can judge from the memories of Artin Madoyan.<sup>168</sup>

From the pages of *Al-Sha‘b*, we also learn that it was not unusual for the French mandatory authorities to forbid the Armenian rival papers to publish hate speeches against each other or incite their supporters against the other prior to important events concerning the community. What was unusual, however, was the fact that Syrian papers were aware of it.<sup>169</sup>

Among the important events in the lives of the Armenians of Syria and Lebanon were the Armenian provincial elections, the Syrian elections, the celebrations of the independence of Armenia, the April 24 commemoration for the victims of the Genocide as well as the celebrations of key literary figures. On these occasions, it was usual to witness an intense press campaign between the two rival Armenian blocs. Increasingly, the sides were not satisfied simply with publishing provocative and insulting articles against one another and doubled their efforts to publish articles in the local Arabic press, too. For example, accounts of the celebrations organized in honor of a leading ARF figure, Aharonian, in Beirut and Paris on April 6, 1930, were also widely published in the Lebanese papers, which included *Al-Ahrar*, *Al-Ahwal*, *Al-Ahd*, *Al-Jaded*, and *Al-Bayrak*. Even the Damascene *Alef-Ba’* had reported on these celebrations, describing how the event in Paris had been organized in the Sorbonne and attended by Aristide Briand, the President of the French Council. The texts published in these papers were undoubtedly provided by ARF.<sup>170</sup> Henschaks and communists, in their turn, distributed fliers in Beirut urging the refugees to stay away and not attend the event in Beirut.<sup>171</sup> The celebrations in Beirut, at least, were interrupted by the clashes between the communists and the police.<sup>172</sup>

Another contentious occasion was the celebration of Armenian independence, which was marked on different days, on May 28 by the ARF and on November 29 by the Henschaks and communists. On both dates, violent clashes usually took place between the two blocs. In 1929, for example, in preparation for May 28, the ARF had put up posters on the doors of the churches

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<sup>167</sup> “Ushagrav Hodvatsshark Me Beirut *Al-Ahwal-I Mej*” [Interesting Series of Articles in *Al-Ahwal*], *Arev*, April 4, 1934, 2.

<sup>168</sup> Madoyan, *Kyanke Me*.

<sup>169</sup> See for example, “*ṣaḥāfir al-ārman*” [The Armenian Journalists], *Al Sha‘b*, October 10, 1928, 3.

<sup>170</sup> “*Surio Arab Tertere Aharonyani Masin*” [Arab Press in Syria about Aharonian], *Husaber*, April 8, 1930, 2.

<sup>171</sup> “*Aharonian-I Hobelyane*” [Aharonian’s Jubilee] *Yerevan*, April 2, 1930, cited in *Husaber*, April 18, 1930, 2.

<sup>172</sup> “*Arab Tertere ev Aharoneani Hobelyane*,” *Husaber*, April 15, 18, 1930, 2.

in the Armenian camp of Beirut calling for active participation. Henchaks and Spartak, on the other hand, had removed these posters, declaring May 28 a mourning day instead. Finally, on May 28, all ARF-run schools remained closed, and when they insisted that all other Armenian schools and institutions follow their example, crowded demonstrations were staged by the Henchaks. In the end, as usual, the police had to interfere. The police inspector general advised the High Commissioner to be more rigorous with the Armenian political committees. For three years, they had been requested to keep calm to no avail. Despite their small numbers, the parties kept the entire refugee camp in continuous turmoil.<sup>173</sup> The inspector's suggestion was simple; expel the agitators and forbid their activities.<sup>174</sup>

Armenian political parties were, evidently, treated with much tolerance in Syria and Lebanon. The French High Commissioner explained the reason for this, "It is difficult for us to act brutally against the Armenians for they constitute an active minority on whom we shall base our policies in Syria and Lebanon."<sup>175</sup> This approach changed briefly after the murder of the Armenian archbishop Leon Tourian on December 24, 1933, in the Armenian Holy Cross Church of New York. The French High Commissioner decided to dissolve all the Armenian political parties and even refused to recognize the public usefulness of AGBU. Ironically, the only political party allowed was the communist party "in order to not damage our former friendships and cooperation lines." Moreover, general interdiction might have caused general public disorder, complicating the task of the mandatory authorities seeking to promote unity among the Armenians.<sup>176</sup> Another factor explains why French authorities could not dissolve the communist party; the French communists showed great interest in the activities of this party. On many occasions, when leading communist members were detained in Syria and Lebanon, the French communist party sent senior lawyers or even deputies of the French parliament to defend them. These arrests were also widely discussed in the *l'Humanité*.<sup>177</sup> The elections in France in the 1930s were another contributory factor.<sup>178</sup> This explains why French mandatory authorities closely monitored the activities of the Armenian political parties, carefully screening their respective press organs. Provocative articles were often removed and troublemakers

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<sup>173</sup> The attached list counted 9 members for ARF, 6 henchaks, 9 Spartak, see in CADN-SL 2388, Sûreté générale, l'inspecteur general de police, "Rapport confidentiel sur la Situation des parties arméniens," 29 mai, 1929.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> CADN-SL 573, Haut-Commissaire à le Ministre des affaires étrangères, "Les comités arméniens au Levant," Beyruth, 22 décembre 1933.

<sup>176</sup> CADN-SL 574, La documentation transmise par Madame Léo Wanner, President la Ligue Internationale des Femmes, without title and date.

<sup>177</sup> For example, in August 1931 André Barton who was a famous lawyer in Paris was sent to Beirut accompanied by a deputy to defend the arrested leaders. See in Madoyan, *Kyanke me*, 127-128.

<sup>178</sup> In the 1930s the socialists, then the socialist-Communist coalition came to power in Paris.

expelled to prevent violent clashes. Armenian leaders were, naturally, unsatisfied with the restrictions.

One such action was taken against the Ramkavars in January 1931. Arshak Chobanian, who was a leading Ramkavar, famous writer, and AGBU member, met Saint Quentin, the vice-president of the Africa-Levant section of the foreign department, to complain about the restrictions imposed on the activities of Ramkavars, in general, and the deportations of some of its members, in particular. The French delegate of Aleppo explained that Ramkavars had never been considered suspects until recently when a certain Gubenlian had arrived from Cyprus and immediately published a series of hostile articles against the ARF. In order to prevent violent incidents, Gubenlian was expelled. On another occasion, Dr. Boghossian, the editor of *Yeprat* was interrogated by the police after a pro-Bolshevik article had appeared in *Yeprat*. The intelligence officer explained that the preventive and restrictive actions were usually directed at the ARF and Henchaks and only rarely at the Ramkavars. Nevertheless, since the latter continued to have a strong pro-Soviet Armenian stance, it had to be closely monitored like the former two. “A lively effervescence reigns in the Armenian Orthodox circles.”<sup>179</sup> This was the reason that police forces were kept ready to interfere in all kinds of Armenian meetings, even during the national mourning ceremony of April 24. Moreover, on several occasions, Syrian and Lebanese authorities declined to authorize the April 24 commemoration ceremonies out of fear of violent clashes. In such cases, Armenian leaders had to ask for the intervention of the mandatory authorities.<sup>180</sup> This was also acknowledged by the Armenians themselves. *La Syrie* published a series of articles penned by an Armenian author, that aimed to introduce the Armenian history to the locals. In one of the articles, the author explained that only a solid organization with considerable prestige could potentially unite all the Armenians and help them overcome their personal interests. Interestingly, he drew parallels between the Armenians and the Turks, who were exactly the opposite. “The Turks show solidarity when they form masses; Armenians, on the other hand, have never been able to form a single front in the face of any danger. Too many religious and party interests divide them.”<sup>181</sup> Ironically, the French mandatory authorities had to protect the Armenians from their own political fanaticism: “the

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<sup>179</sup> [Une vive effervescence regne dans les milieux arméniens orthodoxes], in CADN-SI 574, Le Délégué-Adjoint pour le vilayet d’Alep à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire, “Activité Arménienne,” Alep, 21 janvier 1931.

<sup>180</sup> CADN-SI : 574, Le directeur de la sûreté Générale, inspecteur général des polices, à monsieur le conseiller du Haut-Commissariat aux relations extérieures, “Réunion arménienne” Beyrouth, avril 25, 1932.

<sup>181</sup> “Les turcs se solidarisent plutôt quand ils forment les masses, par contre les arméniens n’ont jamais su s’accorder pour présenter un seul front devant tout danger éventuel. Trop d’intérêts de religions et de partis les divisent.” CADN-SI 574, “Pour mieux connaître les Arméniens du Liban,” *La Syrie*, janvier 1929.



passion for politics is, unfortunately, the worst enemy of the Armenians, the reason for their weaknesses and probably the origin of all the misfortunes that have befallen them.”<sup>182</sup>

Other than the press campaigns, the Armenian parties also used other tactics to discredit their rivals or boast about their own prestige at the expense of the other blocs. One such tactic was the ARF’s recruitment of the Lebanese historian Nesip Shehab to teach Arabic at the Armenian college (Jemaran). Parallel to his teaching activities, Shehab penned a series of articles about contemporary Armenian history, discussing the political parties and their roles in the Lebanese *Al-Ahwal*.<sup>183</sup> This strategic recruitment did not go unnoticed by other Armenian circles. *Arev*’s editors claimed that Shehab was primarily recruited to educate the Syrians and Lebanese by publishing Arabic language articles on Armenian national life, always from the ARF perspective. In this way, ARF was assured that thanks to Shehab’s authority, these articles would find a wide audience. Interestingly, in his first article, Shehab had already praised Armenians for becoming worthy electors, enabling the first nationalist Muslim candidate to succeed thanks to the Armenian vote (3,000 out of 5,000 votes).<sup>184</sup> The second article was entirely devoted to the ARF and Henschak parties, from their inception to the current state of play, always favoring an ARF point of view.<sup>185</sup> The fourth article told the story of the forced socialization of the First Armenian Republic, and the position of all Armenian political parties, reserving a special place for the ARF as the only party to remain aloof from pro-Bolshevik sentiments. Instead, the ARF had strived to keep political ambitions alive among all the Armenians. Tellingly, in this article, “ARF” was replaced by the “Armenian” leaders.<sup>186</sup>

Finally, the last article, published under the title “Armenians in Syria and Lebanon: would they become real Syrians and Lebanese?” was devoted to praising the ARF. The author presented it as the most organized political party, with the greatest number of members.<sup>187</sup> The overwhelming majority of the remaining Armenians were politically neutral but were also against the Bolsheviks, implying that they were thus pro-ARF. The author then presented the schools, once again giving special importance to the ARF-run college, where he was teaching

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<sup>182</sup> CADN-SL 573, Sûreté générale, Damas, secret, “Rapport sur les Arméniens à Alep,” 28 septembre 1929.

<sup>183</sup> Nesip Shehab, “The Armenian Political Parties in Syria and Lebanon: The Revival of the Armenian National Life,” *Al-Ahwal*, 22, 23, 24, 28 February, 3 March 1934 cited in “Ushagrav Hodvatsshark Me Beirut *al-Ahwal*,” *Arev*, April 5, 1934, 2.

<sup>184</sup> The first article of 22 February, in *ibid*.

<sup>185</sup> For example, by presenting the massacres of the Armenians by Abdul Hamid (1904-1905) as the result of the henschak activities, while ARF actions were favorable for organizing demonstrations and making these massacres known to the civilised world. Second and third articles (23, 24 February) cited in “Ushagrav Hodvatsshark Me Beirut *Al-Ahwal-I Mej*,” *Arev*, April 5, 1934, 2.

<sup>186</sup> Fourth article appeared on 28 February 1934, cited in *ibid*, *Arev*, April 6, 1934, 2.

<sup>187</sup> According to this article, ARF had 3,000 members, henschaks 500, communists 300, and ramkavars only 10.

along with his Armenian colleagues, some of whom were famous public figures.<sup>188</sup> It was clear that the author wished to show ARF's superiority in terms of organization and numbers and its political weight in the local elections. Likewise, in the follow-up articles, *Arev's* editors wished to expose the opposite and show exaggerated nature of these claims by the Lebanese historian. It was true that in the recent Lebanese elections, the electoral list in which the ARF candidate had run (Yafi, Ishak, Chavushean) received 5,000 votes, out of which 3,000 were from the Armenian community. Nevertheless, despite the fulsome praise, their list was not the winning list; they had lost against the rival nationalist list on which a non-ARF Armenian candidate had received 9,900 votes. *Arev's* aim was to show that ARF did not enjoy the popularity among the Armenians that it claimed. Moreover, "ARF" could not be a substitute for the word "Armenian" to represent the entire Armenian community. The importance of their own party, Ramkavars, and the AGBU was not presented correctly and needed to be revised.<sup>189</sup> This painful competition was not confined to the interwar years but continued well beyond.<sup>190</sup>

Chapter II demonstrated the external layers of the "Armenian national home" given the important geopolitical events happening in the region, including the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey, the formation of Khoybun, and the revival of communist cells in Syria and Lebanon. All of this greatly impacted the Armenian communities in these countries and contributed to the split between the two rival blocs. Increasingly, the struggle between these two groups was happening outside the community and, particularly, in the Arabic language press, where each bloc employed innovative tactics to attack the other. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates another previously neglected aspect of the anti-Armenian polemic in the Syrian Arabic language press. It was the inter-Armenian power struggle between diametrically opposite ideological blocs – the ARF and the non-ARF forces (Henchaks, Ramkavars, and communists). Thus, we find that a considerable portion of the anti-Armenian discourse in Syria was fed by the rival Armenians themselves.

However, this internal struggle was not confined solely to the Armenian community, the Syrian press, or the Syrian borders. Instead, the situation became more complicated in the light of support from powerful external players. The players outside the Syrian borders were mainly

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<sup>188</sup> Fifth article, "Armenians in Syria and Lebanon: Would They Become Real Syrians and Lebanese?" March 3, 1934, cited in *ibid*, April 7, 1934, 2.

<sup>189</sup> M.T. "Ushagrav Hodvatsashark Me Beirut Al-Ahwal Araberen Terti Mej: Hodvatsasharkin Verlutsume" [A Series of Interesting Articles in the Arabic language *Al-Ahwal* and its Analyses], *Arev*, April 10, 11, 1934, 2.

<sup>190</sup> Yazijian, who was the editor of *Suria* (1946-1960, Aleppo) explained that although his paper was set up as an anti-ARF paper, in recent years he did not publish any articles against the ARF, because the local authorities did not allow him to do so in order not to revive inter-Armenian conflicts. Gevorg Yazijian, *Armenian Diaspora Communities and Political Organizations in the Soviet Secret Documents, 1945-1919* (Yerevan, 2016).

two: Soviet Armenia (USSR) and Turkey. In the next chapter, we will look in detail at these external players.

### **Chapter III: The external players and the information ‘wars’**

This chapter aims to showcase the impact of external players, including Soviet Armenia, the USSR, Turkey, and the AGBU, which was (and still is) an important Armenian diasporic organization. It shows how the age-long confrontation between the Soviet regime and the ARF was happening outside the Armenian borders and increasingly in Syria, a situation that Turkey skillfully exploited. It demonstrates the ARF-AGBU efforts to create a diasporic center for the Armenian refugees and their involvement in the various refugee settlement schemes added a further dimension to the alleged Armenian “national home” in Syria.

#### **ARF - Soviet Armenia confrontation and the “Armenian home”**

This dissertation amply demonstrates that the ARF-Soviet Armenia confrontation was nothing new. While this struggle was continuous, it sometimes intensified in relation to wider geopolitical events. We have seen that it happened during the Syrian Revolt. What was the reason this time? It was clear that the struggle did not start at the beginning of 1930 nor in May 1930 but had begun much earlier. The evidence suggests that the ARF 11<sup>th</sup> General Congress, which met in Paris from March 17 to May 2, 1929, might have well served as the spark for the new confrontation. The Paris-based communist organ *Yerevan* noted on its first page on July 19, 1929, that the new ARF program had repeated the usual demand for a “United and Free Armenia,” based on international treaties recognized by the imperialists. Moreover, some ARF leaders had admitted to having received external support (?) in their struggle against the Soviets. Thus, certain ARF leaders hurried to use the temporary economic crises in the USSR, its political isolation, and the British desire to fight against USSR in pursuit of their own agenda.<sup>191</sup>

The new phase of the confrontation was also marked by the adhesion of ARF to *Prométhée*, a newly formed anti-Soviet alliance.<sup>192</sup> This new alliance, like all similar fronts formed previously, was actively used by Turkey and Poland to put pressure on the Soviet Union.

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<sup>191</sup> “Dashnaksutyan 11rd Endhanur Joghovi Haytagire” [The Announcement of the ARF 11<sup>th</sup> General Congress], II, *Yerevan*, July 19, 1929, 1.

<sup>192</sup> *Prométhée* was the name of the organ of the Committee of independence of the Caucasus published in Paris between 1927 and 1930. Under the cover, it was written “The Organ of the National Defense of the People of the Caucasus: (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Northern Caucasus), Ukraine and Turkmenistan.” See in Vahé Tachjian, *France en Cilicie*, fn. 50, 368.

Tellingly, all the members of the new front were manifestly pro-Kemalist; thus, Turkey's influence within the *Prométhée* was considerable.<sup>193</sup> The initial pro-Turkish attitude of the ARF leaders was explained by the latter's belief that in case the Soviet army left the Caucasus (which they believed would happen soon), Turkey would soon reconquer Armenia; thus there was a need to be in good terms with Turkey. However, their open pro-Turkish orientation was not appreciated by most Armenians, especially the survivors of the genocide. Hence, ARF needed to find a new, "less sensitive" alliance, which they did. This was the alliance with the Kurds in the framework of the Khoybun.<sup>194</sup> Historian Tachjian explained that by choosing to cooperate with the Kurds, whose struggle was directed at Turkey, not Soviet Armenia or USSR, the ARF ended up confronting two enemies at once – Turkey and Soviet Armenia.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, ARF's public declarations after the party's 11<sup>th</sup> General Congress referred to both. Although the statements said that ARF would refrain from any armed struggle or organize a regime change in Soviet Armenia, nevertheless, "the political, economic and cultural emancipation of the Armenians entailed the suppression of the Soviet regime." It also referred to Turkey by urging a continuous struggle obliging it to recognize Armenian political rights.<sup>196</sup> According to Tachjian, although ARF had opened two fronts, the priority remained the regime change in Soviet Armenia and not the struggle against Turkey.<sup>197</sup> However, a question remains. Was it a genuine ARF policy or a Turkish-Soviet claim?

The ARF 11<sup>th</sup> World Congress had also adopted another decision, which was a major shift from the earlier ARF policies. If ARF public discourses in the early 1920s favored the emigration of all Armenian refugees to Soviet Armenia, this changed at the end of the 1920s. Decidedly, the emigration issue had been one of the most important items on the agenda of the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress, which had resolved: "It must be the unequivocal policy of the party... to support by all means those activities the objective of which is the ingathering of the Armenian people in its homeland or around it . . . to assist all public organization and efforts that help the reconstruction of Armenia."<sup>198</sup> However, by the end of the 1920s, ARF became convinced that neither was the Bolshevik regime likely to collapse any time soon nor had their party any chances of undercover survival in Soviet Armenia and would have to confine its activities to

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 368-369.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 369.

<sup>196</sup> "Declarations of 11<sup>th</sup> Congress," *Droshak*, N: 4-5, April-May 1929, Paris, 66.

<sup>197</sup> Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, fn. 50, 370, 372.

<sup>198</sup> Central Archives of ARF, Boston, (hereafter ARF Archives), ARF 10<sup>th</sup> World Congress.

the diaspora.<sup>199</sup> Thus, ARF's 11th Congress resolved to limit its assistance to (Soviet) Armenia to those projects that were necessary for facilitating the emigration. To this end, it would canvas public organizations in the diaspora. They would ask the diaspora to help the refugees settle down, facilitate their economic development, and assist with their cultural needs. For reconstruction purposes in (Soviet) Armenia, they would employ only those public organizations that were not the tools of communist propaganda.<sup>200</sup>

Thus, while repatriation remained a fundamental objective, it was to run parallel to efforts to create robust structures in the diaspora.<sup>201</sup> Schahgaldian observed that ARF membership grew considerably by the end of the 1920s. In 1924, there were 140 members, but by 1932, that number had more than tripled and stood at 460.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, by 1929, the party had already created a youth organization with a membership of about 200 persons in Beirut. A library with a few thousand volumes was also created in the largest refugee camp in Beirut by 1930.<sup>203</sup>

For their part, ARF's organs systematically and repeatedly accused the Soviet authorities, as well as Turkey, of being behind the anti-Armenian polemic in Syria. *Husaber*, for example, claimed that the source spreading rumors about imaginary "Armenian homes" in front of the gates of Cilicia in northern Syria was none-else but the two forces that had appropriated the only Armenian homeland. "Armenians had only one home with the name of *Hayastan* (Armenia), which was divided between Moscow and Ankara. It was these two forces that created the stories of *national homes* to make sure that Armenians lost their real homeland by turning their current hosts against the survivors." The author then mentioned not only the Turkish provocation but, most shockingly, also that of the Soviet Armenian leaders; one of them, Askanaz Mravyan,<sup>204</sup> was the first to declare that Armenian refugees were working to establish a *national home* in Syria. The Armenian refugees were the simple victims of these provocations.<sup>205</sup>

Curiously enough, this time too, as had been the case during the Syrian Revolt, Mravyan's article had appeared months before any other publication, be it Arabic or French, mentioning an "Armenian home" in Syria. On September 30, 1929, Mravyan was the first to voice his

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<sup>199</sup> Nikola B. Schahgaldian, "The Political Integration of an Immigrant Community into a Composite Society: The Armenians in Lebanon, 1920-1974," (Unpublished Ph.D diss., Columbia University, 1979), 104-105.

<sup>200</sup> Central Archives of ARF, Resolutions of the 11<sup>th</sup> World Congress.

<sup>201</sup> A radical departure from this position happened at the end of the 1930s. The ARF's 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress, held in Paris in 1938 stated in a single sentence its non-opposition to repatriation which was more of a lip-service to traditional Armenian sentiments than a serious policy objective. Schahgaldian, "The Political," 104-105.

<sup>202</sup> ARF Archives, Central Committee of Syria and Lebanon. File 1564/45, Report of Activities, 1929-1932, 12.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, File 1558/39, Report of Activities, 1925-1929, 16-17.

<sup>204</sup> Askanaz Mravyan was the People's Commissar of Education, deputy chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Soviet Armenia from 1923 to 1929 as well as the chief editor of *Khorherdayin Hayastan*.

<sup>205</sup> Editorial, "Odzer, Agravner" [Snakes, Ravens], *Husaber*, February 5, 1930, 1.

concerns over the *Armenian home* in the making in Syria, drawing parallels between the Armenian settlement in Syria and the Jewish one in Palestine.<sup>206</sup> This declaration was made before the influx of new refugees from Turkey and before the Syrian polemic! What was behind Mravyan's declarations that effectively created a strong anti-Armenian polemic in Syria?

According to *Husaber*, Soviet leaders tried to prove that Armenians in Syria were, indeed, busy establishing a "national home." It cited *Proletar*, a communist organ from Tbilisi, where a leading Bolshevik, a certain Khanoyan had declared that "there were no doubts, that ARF members were the allies of the imperialists as there were no doubts that the French knew how to 'appreciate' the tools in their hands – the ARF. If ARF did not have the French support, their leader Vratsyan would have never dared to declare that Armenians of Syria were looking for an appropriate moment to (re)conquer Cilicia."<sup>207</sup> Another Soviet agent, a certain Sasanian, had declared that the ARF was playing with fire by allying with the Kurds and risking the lives of the Armenians in Syria. Instead, Sasanian advised the Armenians to incite the Kurds against their governments in Iraq and Iran, which could help establish peace in the Middle East and serve the Armenian interests. Moreover, Sasanian claimed that recent deportations of the peaceful Armenian peasants from Turkey had been the direct result of the ARF-Kurdish cooperation.<sup>208</sup>

It was clear that, in May 1930, the "Armenian home" talks had disturbed the Soviet authorities as much as it had the Syrian nationalists. Why? Soviet authorities were disturbed because Armenians were not only gathered at the Syrian-Turkish border but also on the Iraqi-Turkish border. The Ramkavar organ *Apaga* from Paris had previously reported that 2,000 Armenian refugees of Naher al-Omar had been transferred to Mosul.<sup>209</sup> Armenian local authorities had asked permission for their transfer from the Iraqi authorities; however, it was thanks to British intervention that the transfer had taken place. An announcement by the ARF leader Khatisyan that these refugees came mainly from Vaspurakan and were one day to return to their homeland had served as a clear sign for the editors of the communist *Yerevan*. For the latter, it was obvious that the ARF was busy doing the same as they had done in Syria – gathering the Armenian refugees in one place, close to the Turkish border. The fact that the

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<sup>206</sup> A. Mravyan, "Aavor Nakhazgatcum" [A Terrible Warning], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, September 29, 1929, 3.

<sup>207</sup> S. Khanoyan, "Husaberi Tendentsianneri Kaghakakan Arjeke" [The Political Price of Husaber's Tendancies], *Proletar*, N: 287, cited in "Odzer, Agravner" [Snakes, Ravens], *Husaber*, February 10, 1930, 2.

<sup>208</sup> Editorial, "Kerdakan Date ev Menk. Turkia, Iran ev Iraq" [The Kurdish Cause and We: Turkey, Iran and Iraq], *Husaber*, March 11, 1930, 1.

<sup>209</sup> These refugees were previously in the Bakuba refugee camp. More on the Baquba refugee camp on the outskirts of Baghdad see, H.H Austin, *The Baqubah Refugee Camp* (Gorgias, 2006); B. T. White, "Humans and Animals in a Refugee Camp: Baquba. Iraq, 1918-1920," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 32:2 (2019), 216-236.

Iraqi government had been against it, and the issue had been solved by the British, who not only allowed it but also allocated lands from the former Sultan's domains, was more than suspicious. Soviet authorities suspected the real reason the Armenians had been transferred there was to use their labor in the oil fields. Moreover, Mosul was also an important ARF activity center; therefore, the ARF had pleaded with the AGBU for financial support to make the transfer possible.<sup>210</sup>

This *Yerevan* article was revealing, for it helped explain the Soviets' suspicions that there was indeed an "Armenian home" in the making. It also reinforced the notion that if AGBU agreed to provide the demanded funds, the cooperation between the AGBU and ARF would strengthen, which was perceived as dangerous by the Soviets. Moreover, the paper noted that, although this transfer in Iraq did not receive as much attention from the authorities or the local press as the events in Syria, nevertheless, due to the hyperactivity of the ARF, the local authorities had started to notice. Did Soviet agents alert the local authorities to see what was happening and make connections with the Syrian events? It is difficult to say, but suddenly the Baghdad press and *Istiklal*, in particular, did start to see connections. *Istiklal* reported that a new misfortune had befallen the Arabs. According to the paper, French authorities had deported the Arabic tribes, such as the Shammer, instead inviting the Armenians and the Chaldeans "to occupy the lands along the Khabour river, a territory that has always been Arab – before and after Islam." The natives were being replaced by the strangers notorious for being hostile to the Arabs. By doing so, the French authorities intended to separate two brotherly countries, Syria and Iraq.<sup>211</sup>

We shall see later that not only was the idea of the "Armenian home in Syria" first circulated by the Soviet Armenian leaders, but they also encouraged the spread of many news articles on the topic in the Arabic press through the Armenian communists. Notably, the Arabic press had another important source in this regard, the Turkish press. Against this backdrop, we can safely assume that the accusations of the Mravyan, vice-president of Armenia, and commissar of education, regarding the Armenian "national home" in Syria came as a response to the announcements of the ARF's 11<sup>th</sup> Congress. In fact, Mravyan did refer to the Congress, its decisions, and the publications of *Droshak*. Moreover, Mravyan mentioned Palestine and the violent clashes there during the last week of August 1929, merely a month before his accusation.

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<sup>210</sup> "Suriayen Heto Iraq: Dashnaktutyun Nor Arkatsakhndrutiyune" [After Syria, Iraq: ARF's New Adventures], *Yerevan*, May 11, 1930, 1.

<sup>211</sup> CADN-SL 575, Direction du service des reinseinment du Levant, Info 394, "Installation d'Arméniens dans le bassin du Khabour," Extract de press irakienne, *Istiklal* du 23 mai 1930, "Un des malheurs des arabes," Beyrouth, 11 juin 1930.

He referred to an unnamed ARF paper reporting on the difficult conditions of the Jews in Palestine, who had aimed to create a “national home” there, saying that the Armenians would have similar difficulties if their plans came to fruition (?). Here, Mravyan was alluding to the ARF that supported “United and Free Armenia” and the suspicious support the Armenian refugees of Syria and Lebanon were given by the LoN and imperialist France. Moreover, in his view, many imperialist political games were related to that “Armenian home” and its achievement in Syria with the support of the Ramkavars and the ARF. Otherwise, how was it possible to explain the establishment of Armenian villages among the Arab population, especially along the Syrian-Turkish border, for which both LoN and France allocated considerable funds (including funds raised previously for the Yerevan irrigation scheme in Soviet Armenia)? It was clear that France wished to use these settlements as the British used Jewish settlements in Palestine – against the liberation struggles of the Arabs. Moreover, these settlements were directed at threatening Turkey as well as at the Armenian and Arab workers. The ARF was surely behind it, explaining the suspicious visits of leading ARF members (Koms, Khatisyan, and Nicol Aghbalian) to Aleppo. As such, this “Armenian home” was to be a disaster for the Armenians. To save the refugees from this danger, Mravyan had called on the Armenian communists and “workers” to fight against the imperialists along with the native “workers.”<sup>212</sup>

The *Yeprat* editors who received the news of this announcement did not hide their bewilderment and astonishment. Such an announcement by a leading Soviet Armenian official clearly showed that the latter lacked all knowledge on the matter. How could he compare the Balfour declaration that foresaw the “Jewish home,” where wealthy Jews settled, with the Armenian refugees who had nowhere to go? Did Mravyan think the refugee shanties compared with the large, elegant homes and factories built in Palestine? *Yeprat*’s editors blamed Mravyan and other Soviet leaders who had failed to open the doors of Soviet Armenia previously for the refugees so they could choose before deciding to settle down in Syria permanently. For the author, such claims were absurd, for there was no Armenian question in Syria. Moreover, Mravyan’s total lack of knowledge of the Syrian reality was clear in his contentious calls for class struggle when there were neither factories nor workers, exploiters, or employees in Syria.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Mravyan, “Aavor Nakhazgushatcum,” *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, September 29, 1930, 3.

<sup>213</sup> Editorial, “Khorherdayin Hayastan Tertin Erevakayutyunnere” [The Imaginations of the Khorherdayin Hayastan], *Yeprat*, November 13, 1929, 1.



### **ARF-Khoybun cooperation behind the ARF-Soviet Armenia confrontation?**

The ARF organ, *Husaber*, on the other hand, placed Soviet Armenia and Turkey on the same level, claiming that these two forces had unlawfully divided the historic Armenian homeland between themselves and now did everything possible to turn the opinion of the host populations against the refugees.<sup>214</sup> *Husaber* published the *Yerevan* issue warning against the ARF-backed Armenian home in Syria in its entirety, and asked *Yerevan* to publish the secret Russian-Turkish provisions on the Armenians.<sup>215</sup> *Yerevan* in its turn, cited the whole article from *L'Orient* about the Armenian-Kurdish home, then *Fata' al-Arab's* article, and finally *Husaber's* article. It then challenged the ARF, asking them for public denial of any plans to establish such a "home." It then announced the ARF-Khoybun cooperation and declared that until the ARF did not cease to exist, Syrians would have every reason to fear the "snakes and the ravens."<sup>216</sup>

Effectively, a bitter press battle was being waged between the communist organ *Yerevan* and the ARF organ *Husaber*, for the latter was soon accused by the former of forming a secret alliance with the Kurds that was potentially deadly for the Armenians of Syria.<sup>217</sup> Moreover, a certain Sasanian penned a series of articles, exposing many secret Armenian-Kurdish agreements, unknown until that time.<sup>218</sup> In these articles Sasanian claimed that the Kurdish uprisings (current and previous) were all incited by the British. If, in 1925, it was done to create issues for Turkey to claim the oil-rich Mosul, nowadays it was directed toward the Turkish-Soviet alliance. The location of the revolt – Ararat – on the Soviet-Turkish borderlands accommodated perfectly both British and ARF interests. British could easily break the Soviet-Turkish alliance while ARF could attack Soviet Armenia to fulfill its dream of 'Armenia from sea to sea'. Sasanian cited Vratsian, the prominent ARF leader and the last prime minister of the Armenian Republic who had reportedly said that it would be a grave mistake to not act united with the Kurds in their struggle since their interests correlated.<sup>219</sup> In other articles the author revealed ARF-Khoybun cooperation accusing it of being the main reason for the recent

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<sup>214</sup> Editorial, "Odzer, Agravner," *Husaber*, February 5, 1930, 1.

<sup>215</sup> *Yerevan*, 29 January, 1930, cited in "Poche Aghvesi, Dunche Gayli" [The Tail from the Fox, the Jaw from the Wolf], *Husaber*, February 7, 1930, 2.

<sup>216</sup> "Dashnak Arksakhendirneru Pashtpanoghakane" [The Defense of the ARF Adventurers], *Yerevan*, February 16, 1930, 1.

<sup>217</sup> *Yerevan*, February 19, 1930, cited in "Arajark Me: Mere Hay-Kerdakan, Isk Dzere?" [A suggestion: Ours – Kurdo-Armenians and Yours?], *Husaber*, March 5, 1930, 2.

<sup>218</sup> S. (Sasanian), "Kerdakan Sharjunnere ev Dashnaktsakan Kousaktsutyune" [Kurdish Movements and the ARF Political Party], *Yerevan*, February 19, 21, 1930, 2-3.

<sup>219</sup> Editorial, "Ushagrav Khostovanutyunner" [Remarkable Confessions], *Husaber*, March 10, 1930, 1; Sasanian, "Kerdakan Sharjunnere", *Yerevan*, February 19, 1930, 1.

Armenian deportations from Turkey. Armenians abroad were called to form a united front against the ARF to stop new misfortunes.<sup>220</sup>

On another occasion, *Yerevan* reprinted an article from *Yeprat*. This was a conversation with a prominent unnamed ARF member in which the latter had claimed that all the fundraising campaigns run by ARF were intended to regroup and settle all the Armenian refugees close to the border.<sup>221</sup> If the Kurdish rebellion were successful, they would cross to Turkey to occupy their former lands. The issue, thus, was not just the settlement of the refugees; it was, above all, politics. The ARF member had reportedly admitted that such a policy would require many sacrifices, but Armenia would be liberated.<sup>222</sup> The *Yeprat* article was republished in *Yerevan* without any comments.

These articles tried to make ARF responsible for the recent Turkish deportations of the remaining Armenians. However, the argument was illogical. Why should the ARF try to bring the remaining Armenians to Syria only to cross back later? It is evident that a bitter press battle was being waged between ARF and the Soviet authorities, in which each side tried to mobilize its constituency and press organs to undermine and blackmail the other in all possible ways. Clearly, the Soviet authorities not only observed closely the events happening in the Middle East but, sensing a secret plot against Soviet rule, also followed the declarations of the ARF leaders and the alleged ARF-Khoybun cooperation. I argue that the suspicions of the Soviet Armenian leaders were further exploited skillfully by Turkey and the Turkish press. It was the Turkish press that channeled most of the news about the ARF-Khoybun cooperation as well as wider geostrategic events to the USSR, presenting it in a way that multiplied the suspicions. The Turkish press was, thus, another important element in the ARF-Soviet Armenia confrontation that further nourished the story of the “Armenian home.”

### **Turkish press and the “Armenian home” in Syria**

Similarly, Turkey was concerned with the “enclave of undesirables” comprising Armenians and Kurds on its southern borders as well as the ARF-Khoybun cooperation. As shown by Altuğ, the Turkish press often spread (mis)information about the Armenian settlements in Syria.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid, February 21, 1930, 3.

<sup>221</sup> “Inch Khoher ev Erazner” [What Thoughts and Dreams], *Yerevan*, February 23, 1930, 1.

<sup>222</sup> Sisak, “Mer Tesaktsutyune” [Our Meeting], IV, (Damascus, January 14, 1930) in *Yeprat*, February 5, 1930, 1-2.

<sup>223</sup> Seda Altuğ “Türkiye Suriye ils Sinirini Temizlerken, 1,2,3” [Turkey Clearing Up Its Border with Syria), *Agos*, April 9, 14, 27, 2007; Turkish Republic Priministry Archives, Muamelet 94A/47, Ministry of Interior, Directorate

At the end of the 1920s, Turkey was concerned about the Khoybun alliance and its activities, especially in the Syrian Jazira. However, Turkish complaints regarding the “undesirables” on their borderlands were not confined to the Khoybun activities. Such complaints were raised during the border delimitation meetings and submitted to the French embassy.<sup>224</sup>

In a lengthy note, Ponsot explained that Turkey had recently accused France of encouraging the anti-Turkish attitude of certain refugees (Armenian and Kurdish) by settling them along the border. He was adamant that most of them were not refugees and had lived there for centuries. “It would be inhumane to remove these populations for the sake of a secured Syrian-Turkish border.”<sup>225</sup> He outlined the background of the new Armenian settlements that had started in March 1927 in collaboration with the ILO *to provide humanitarian assistance to the Armenian refugees*. According to Ponsot, this should not worry the Turks, for there were limited financial resources, and he remarked on *the favorable attitude of the local government*, which aimed to dismantle the camps. He also spoke about the Kurdish political refugees who had settled in the Upper Jazira, a region that the French did not control at the time of their arrival but did so by the end of August 1927. Ponsot concluded that the French actions respected all the provisions of the bon voisinage treaty.<sup>226</sup> Four years later, Ponsot sent a similar note to Quai d’Orsay, where he again defended the Armenian settlement in Jazira against the unjustified Turkish claims. The key to security in the borderlands was not the removal of the refugees but the disarming of both sides. For Ponsot, the Turkish fears stemmed from imaginary dangers and were unnecessarily exaggerated, while border-related issues ought to be solved diplomatically.<sup>227</sup>

Ponsot was instructed to improve the security in the borderlands by strengthening the control and removing all dubious elements from the border.<sup>228</sup> The Turkish press, especially in Cilicia, continuously reported on the alleged “Armenian home” in the Syrian Jazira even after the French actions against the Khoybun members. *Halk Sesi* of Mardine claimed that the ARF committee of Paris had decided to gather all the Armenians living abroad in northern Syria and Iraq. Hence, 20,000 Armenian refugees were to be brought from Greece. It reported that the

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of General Security (Dahiliye Vekaleti Emniyet Umumiye Müdüriyeti), cited in Altuğ, “The Turkish-Syrian Border and Politics of Difference in Turkey and Syria (1921-1939)” in *Syria: Borders, Boundaries*, 56.

<sup>224</sup> CADN-SL 574, Du Haut-Commissaire à Le Conseiller Adjoint pour le vilayet d’Alep, “Listes d’indésirables,” no date.

<sup>225</sup> CADN-SL 574, Ponsot, le Haut-Commissaire à le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, 29 septembre 1927.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>227</sup> CADN-SL 574, Ponsot, à Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, “Menaces arménienne et kurdes à la frontière syro-turque,” Beyrouth, mars 1931.

<sup>228</sup> CADN-SL 574, Télégramme, Du diplomatie Paris à Le Haut-Commissaire, “Menées révolutionnaires sur la frontière Syro-turque,” 20 mai 1931 ; Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères à Monsieur Ponsot, “Activité arménienne et Kurdes en Syrie,” 20 avril 1931.

Syrians were concerned lest their country became an independent national home for the Armenians.<sup>229</sup>

The Turkish press, naturally, also instilled fear in the Soviet authorities on a regular basis, alarming them about the construction of the “Armenian home” in Syria. Turkish sources had been largely successful in “proving” that the Kurdish revolt was not just a push for Kurdish liberation but a movement initiated by the British; thus, the Kurds were tools in the latter’s hands. The Armenian Henschak organ in New York was fully convinced of it. Armenians could not support this movement since it was controlled by the British.<sup>230</sup> According to this paper, the imperialists had divided the Middle East between them and exploited them ruthlessly. The exploitation had intensified recently, given the economic crises that threatened to spark widespread discontent and revolutions. The red shadow of communism frightened the imperialists. Moreover, Mosul oil had a role to play. It had recently been discovered that the oil sources stretched northward to Erzurum. Since the new reserves were in Turkish territories, the imperial powers preferred to use other groups acting undercover. Previously, the Armenians had played such roles; now, said the paper, the Kurds were being used for the same purpose. It was the British who controlled the Kurdish movement from Iraq. After all, the British had closely studied the psychology of the small nations in the Middle East and knew how to incite them. Then, the author mentioned how the British had been successful in inciting the Sheikh Said revolt under a religious cover; now, they had given the Kurdish issue a nationalist-liberationist camouflage. The British were sure they would become the mandatory power over liberated Kurdistan. It was no coincidence, then, that the Kurdish movement was concentrated on the Mosul-Van-Erzurum-Ararat line, which was the part to be connected to Mosul in the future. Turkey understood the danger of this plan and did everything to suppress the revolt. The British, however, would continue to incite the Kurds until the desired concessions were received, after which the Kurds were to be left on their own.<sup>231</sup>

Such an interpretation was undoubtedly influenced by the Marxist point of view but was also the one propagated by the Turkish press. It presented the ongoing Kurdish movement, as well as Khoybun, together with the “Armenian home,” and was directed simultaneously at Turkey and the USSR. Turkey wished to have the support of the USSR not only to suppress the Kurdish rebellion but also to fight against the ARF and possibly get rid of the Armenian

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<sup>229</sup> CADN-SL 574, Le Haut Commissaire au le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, “Une décision du Comité Tachnag.” Paris, 12 juin 1931; Sûreté Générale, N:2061, Etat de Syrie -Alep, Beyrouth, 29 mai 1931.

<sup>230</sup> V. Marsian, “Kerdakan Sharjume Ev Nra Patjanere” [Kurdish Movement and its Reasons], (a) *Yeritasard Hayastan*, December 13, 1930, 1.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, II, December 27, 1930, 1.

concentrations from the Syrian-Turkish border. We shall see later how effective the Turkish propaganda was in meeting most of these objectives.<sup>232</sup>

The Turkish press reported on the ARF-Khoybun cooperation almost daily. *Milliyet* published a long series of articles at the beginning of 1931 telling the story of Khoybun. Special attention was given to the alleged British involvement and the ARF, presenting the whole alliance to be against Turkey and Russia simultaneously. The account said that the ARF-Khoybun partnership was keen to achieve regime change in Russia and Turkey. Moreover, they hoped to accomplish this through the White Russian army headed by Kiril from the Romanov dynasty, who wished to restore the monarchy, and their allies ARF, who could ensure its success in the Caucasus. First, they needed to convince Turkey. However, because Turkey had cordial relations with Russia, the regime had to be changed in Turkey first before any actions against Russia could be unleashed. The new Turkish regime was to be sympathetic toward the idea of a United Armenia.<sup>233</sup> Finally, on February 9, 1931, *Milliyet* publicly announced that the biggest Turkish enemy was indubitably the ARF.<sup>234</sup>

It is striking how the Turkish side wished to show that Khoybun and its activities were directed first at Russia and then at Turkey. By doing so, the Turkish government wished not only to secure the Russian front but, more importantly, to expose the ARF by showing that it was collaborating with the traditional Soviet enemies. The aim was to have both ARF and Khoybun destroyed by the Soviet forces. This was also fully acknowledged by ARF, whose organ first published *Milliyet*'s articles without comments, and then analyzed them in its later editions. It stated that *Milliyet* did not wish to explain the Khoybun movement to its readers but to create inter-ethnic conflict by demonstrating to the Kurds that the Armenians wished to use them to establish a Greater Armenia.<sup>235</sup> Once again, as had been the case during the Syrian

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<sup>232</sup> The other goal of Turkey was to bring the Little Ararat mountain under its own control, which it succeeded. Tejel, "The Last Ottoman Rogues," 379-381. For a long-term study on the Turkish-Iranian border, see Sabri Ates, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>233</sup> "Dashnak-Khoybun: Whom and How These Two Rebellious Organizations Formed?," *Milliyet*, January 17, 1931, cited in *Husaber*, January 27, 28, 1931, 2. *Milliyet* ran a long series of articles, where it presented the origins of the Kurdish people, their language, religion, habits, who was Ihsan Nuri, see in *Husaber*, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23 February 1931 issues, 2. *Husaber* too, ran its own series, see "What Force and Value Do the Kurds Have in Turkey?," see in *Husaber*, February 17, 19, 23, 25; March 18, 1931, 1; "Dashnak-Hoybun: a United Front against Turkey and Russia: Armenians Demanded Support from the British," *Milliyet* January 19, 1931, cited in *Husaber*, January 29, 1931, 2.

<sup>234</sup> "Dashnak-Khoybun Miutyune: Mer Amenamets Tshnamin Dashnaknern en : Dashnaknere Sharjman Mej Dnelov Irents Amboghj Ujere Mezi Dem Kashkhaten," *Milliyet*, February 9, 1931, cited in *Husaber*, February 24, 1931, 2; It must be noted that in parallel to quotes from the publications of *Milliyet*, the same paper also presented the recently published memoirs of the Soviet former Chekist (intelligence officer) Aghabekov.

<sup>235</sup> Editorial, "Milleyete ev Menk: Kerdakan Sharjume Kemalakan Lusardzaki Tak" [Milleyet and Us: Kurdish Movement from the Kemlaist Perspective], *Husaber*, February 5, 1931, 1.

Revolt, Soviet and Turkish interests overlapped in countering imperialist plots and common enemies, among them the ARF.

Curiously, all the non-ARF Armenian circles blamed ARF for providing information to the Turkish press that inspired the articles in *Milliyet*. It is also clear that both Armenian blocs were well-aware that the rivalry between them was skillfully exploited by external players and the Turkish press in particular. *Husaber* lamented that, while the two Armenian blocs were busy annihilating each other, the Turkish press organs followed them with great interest.<sup>236</sup>

It was no coincidence either that Soviet Armenia was involved in suppressing the Ararat revolt. The Soviet embassy in Tehran had managed to break the ARF code and could read all the secret communications.<sup>237</sup> To support their ally Turkey and fight their common enemy – the ARF, the USSR consul of Tehran, Davtyan (an Armenian) submitted all the secret documents to the Iranian government, also informing the Turkish embassy. As a result, many ARF members were expelled.<sup>238</sup> Thus, if the ARF supported the Kurdish rebellion and, by doing so, hoped to achieve certain territorial gains for the Ottoman Armenians, another group of Armenians – the communists, worked tirelessly to destroy both the Kurdish rebellion and the ARF altogether. It was this duality – the representation of all the Armenians, including the Ottoman refugees, sovereignty crises, and the issue of legitimacy (both as a recognized regime and a homeland) that divided Armenians throughout the 1920s and 1930s, well before the Cold War years, when such a situation became the norm.<sup>239</sup>

As soon as Khoybun lost its political importance and the Kurdish rebellion was effectively suppressed, the Turkish press concentrated its entire attention on the small Armenian colonies in northern Syria. This time, it was the “smuggling nests of the Armenians” on the Syrian-Turkish border that became the main topic. A whole series of articles was devoted to this phenomenon by *Hakimiyet Milliye*, the official organ of the Kemalist government.<sup>240</sup> One such

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<sup>236</sup> “Urishneru Kartsike: Anonk ev Menk” [Others’ Opinion: They and Us], *Husaber*, February 13, 1931, 1.

<sup>237</sup> Georgi S. Aghabekov, *GPU, Zapiski Chekista* [The Notes of the Intelligence Worker] (Paris, 1930).

<sup>238</sup> Agabekov, *GPU*, 219.

<sup>239</sup> This idea is also expressed by Tachjian, see Vahé Tachjian, “Humanitarian Diaspora? The AGBU in Soviet Armenia, 1920-30s” in *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the Present*, ed. Jo Laycock et al. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020). For the struggle during the Cold War years see Tsolin Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora: Making Lebanon Their Own* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

<sup>240</sup> “Surio Hayere Misht Achki Push: Hima al Maksaneng” [The Armenians of Syria again Guilty: Now They Are Smugglers], *Harach*, December 2, 1931; *Hakimiyet Milliye*, December 13, 1931, in “Turkere Ksharunaken Gergrutyunner Sermanel Surio Hay Gaghtakannerun Dem” [Turks Continue to Incite the Syrians against the Armenians], *Harach* December 20, 1931, “Dashnak-Khoybun Smugglers: How the Syrian Smuggling is Organized?,” *Hakimiyet Milliye*, December 19, 1931, reproduced in *Harach*, December 29, 1931; Nashit Hagge “Maksanengutyun Buynere Surio Sahmanin Vra” [The Smuggling Nests on the Syrian-Turkish Border], *Hakimiyet Milliye*, January 4, 5, 1932. For more, see AGBU archives, Nubar Library, fond COMMGN (19), Greece, Liban, Syrie, Iran, ARM.

article claimed that from Jarablus to Jazira, there were about 9,308 smugglers who robbed the bordering Turkish regions of their wealth. The paper reported that there were about 82,400 Armenians settled in Jazira alone (the total number of Armenians in the whole of Syria was 87,000). While Hassake and Qamishli were not only perfect nests for smugglers but also important centers that harbored all kinds of political intrigues hosting Dashnaks (ARF) and traitors threatening the peace of the southern vilayets.<sup>241</sup> In these articles, *Hakimiyet Milliye* aimed not only to alert but also to educate the Turkish population, especially in the borderland territories, about smuggling, which was identified as a crime equal to the betrayal of the homeland.<sup>242</sup> In these articles, special attention was devoted to Qamishli, an emerging center that had downgraded the importance of Nusaybin and Jazir al-Omar.<sup>243</sup> Apart from Qamishli, other locations such as Qaramaniye and Amuda (each with 150 shops), Andivar (with 100 shops), Derik, and yet others (Azaz, Jarablus, Arab-Punar) were listed.<sup>244</sup>

Needless to say, new Armenian settlements were presented in an exaggerated way, endowing them with great importance in terms of numbers and impact. Moreover, by tying the smuggling activities and the Armenians together, an attempt was made to portray the Armenian refugees once again as the main reason for the economic difficulties in Turkey. *Hakimiyet Milliye* was explicit in its message, “By engaging in smuggling, Armenians wished to ruin Turkey economically since they did not achieve it politically.”<sup>245</sup> According to this paper, entire tribes were involved, and the network stretched from Jazira to the ports of the Black Sea, interwoven with spy networks. The success of these networks was due to the smugglers’ knowledge of the local language and customs, as well as their previous relations with the Turkish merchants.<sup>246</sup>

Articles about “Armenian smuggling nests” included references to the “Armenian home” in Jazira, which French authorities were establishing under the “Jazira government.” For *Yeni Kyu* this was intimately connected with the legislative elections in Syria in December 1931 and January 1932, since the French relied greatly on these dubious elements to have pro-mandate

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<sup>241</sup> *Hakimiyet Milliye*, December 24, 1931, reproduced in “Nor Hardzakum Me Hayeru Vra” [A New Attack on the Armenians], *Harach*, January 2, 1932.

<sup>242</sup> More on this, see Jordi Tejel, “Des femmes contre des moutons: franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929-1944),” *20&21, Revue d’histoire*, No:145, 35-47; Öztan “The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish-Syrian Border, 1921-1939,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.16:2, 311-326.

<sup>243</sup> More about it see in Jordi Tejel, “Un territoire de marge en haute Djézireh syrienne, 1921-1940,” *Etudes Rurales*, N : 186 (2010), 61-76.

<sup>244</sup> *Hakimiyet Milliye*, December 24, 1931, reproduced in “Nor Hardzakum.”

<sup>245</sup> *Hakimiyet Milliye*, December 13, 1931, in “Turkere Ksharunaken Gergutyunner Sermanel.”

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

candidates elected in the Assembly who could then establish the “Jazira government.”<sup>247</sup> While the articles were greatly exaggerated, they contained an element of truth for, as shown by Tachjian, the French closed their eyes largely to Khoybun’s activities from 1930 to 1931, since many Khoybun members were pro-mandate in their own interests during the elections. As a result, three Kurdish candidates and one ARF candidate, all Khoybun members, were successfully elected to the Syrian Assembly.<sup>248</sup>

Tejel, on the other hand, pointed out another important factor. The French used the “Kurdish card” successfully in the border delimitation committee with Turkey.<sup>249</sup> The Syrian-Turkish border was delimited during this critical period, on June 22, 1929. Notably, French forces entered the Upper Jazira on June 3–6, 1930, at a time when the Ararat revolt was at its height.<sup>250</sup> This notwithstanding, as late as March 1933, the Turkish authorities demanded that the French authorities remove the Armenian settlements from the bordering regions, arguing that Kurdish-Armenian cooperation had destabilized Turkey and smuggling had damaged the Turkish economy. The French authorities did not agree; they responded that the Armenian settlements could not possibly be a problem for Turkish security for the settlements were limited both in scope and scale.<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, the French claimed that smuggling existed because of the tariff difference, not because of Armenians, and would continue to exist even if there were no Armenians in the region.<sup>252</sup> Instead, the French authorities urged their Turkish counterparts to agree on tariffs. Finally, Armenians settled along the Syrian-Turkish border constituted the same kind of “danger” as the Armenians inhabiting the Eastern and North-Eastern border of Turkey, that is, Soviet Armenia; therefore, the French could not possibly satisfy the Turkish demand.<sup>253</sup> This last point presented by the High Commissioner was particularly contentious for it compared the Armenian settlement in the Syrian Jazira with that of Soviet Armenia, which was the historic Armenian homeland.

Curiously, Turkey saw it in the same way. Turkey was against a concentration of Armenians on its borderlands, whether in Syria or Soviet Armenia. When, in 1924, about 1,500 refugees were transferred from Istanbul to Yerevan, many Turkish press organs announced that

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<sup>247</sup>“Erkeres Kaghakanutyun: Haykakan Petutyun Me Turk ev Sirakan Sahmani Vra” [A Double Poetics: An Armenian State on the Turkish-Syrian Border], *Yeni Kyu, Cumhuriyet*, December 16, 1931, cited in *Harach*, December 20, 1931.

<sup>248</sup> Khalil Bey Ibn Ibrahim pasha (Jazira), Mustafa Ibn Chahine bey (Jerablus), and Hassan Awni (Kurd dagh) and Hrach Papazian (Aleppo), Vahé Tachjian, “Le Koybun dans la Haute Mesopotamie,” 37.

<sup>249</sup> The term “Kurdish card” is used by Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s*, 19.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, also Tachjian, “Le Koybun dans la Haute Mesopotamie,” 21.

<sup>251</sup> CADN-SL 574, Le Haut-Commissaire de la R.F. à Son Excellence Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères “Réfugiés arméniens en Syrie,” (no date).

<sup>252</sup> Öztan, “The Great Depression.”

<sup>253</sup> CADN-SL 574, Le Haut-Commissaire à le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères “Réfugiés arméniens en Syrie.”



“Armenian refugees were brought to Armenia, close to the Turkish border... who pursued further goals.”<sup>254</sup> During the Soviet repatriation of 1931–32, Turkey voiced its concerns. An article in the *Times*, reporting from Istanbul, had stated how Turkey feared a large concentration of Armenians on its borderlands both in the Caucasus and Syria... which threatened the future of its Eastern vilayets. Ironically, in this article, the author had claimed that the Soviet authorities and ARF were acting in unity because one sought to ingather Armenians in the Caucasus while the other sought to do the same in Syria.<sup>255</sup>

The Turkish press had also attempted to play with the internal Armenian distinction between Ottoman and Russian, claiming that Soviet Armenia was not a *homeland* for the Ottoman Armenians; thus, Soviet efforts to bring more Ottoman Armenians were doomed to fail.<sup>256</sup> Later Turkey was also against any large-scale Soviet repatriation efforts for the same reason, as we shall see later.

Press articles were not the only method used to disturb the lives of the Armenian refugees in Syria. In the Autumn of 1932, all Syrian and Armenian circles were blitzed by a brochure titled “Syria and Us” (*Suria ev Menk*). The brochure was signed by a certain A. Nicole, and Cairo was given as the city of publication.<sup>257</sup> The author announced that the publication’s main aim was to clarify the position of the Armenians and erase the bad impressions presented to the Syrians by the Turkish papers. Instead, it aimed to demonstrate the importance of the Armenian community in Syria. Moreover, the author claimed to represent the totality of the ideals, goals, and principles of one important political party (ARF?). Four main themes were discussed in the brochure: Syria and the Syrians, France and the Armenians, the Armenian colony in Syria, and the Syrian state and Armenia. The author highlighted that France, who had taken the Armenian refugees under her protection, did not transfer them elsewhere (Tunisia, Algeria) but instead brought them to Syria, settling them in front of the Armenian homeland (*durnerun arjev haykakan hayrenikin*). She did so not only for historical, political, civilizational, or social reasons but also to develop and protect Syria along with the Syrians, thus taking revenge on the historical enemy (Turkey)... The author then announced that the ARF supported the Armenian concentration in northern Syria, keeping them close together, forbidding their departure to

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<sup>254</sup> Editorial, “Mer Erkirm al Shat Ke Tesnen” [Even Our Country They Consider it too Much for Us], *Arev*, September 24, 1924, 1.

<sup>255</sup> *Harach*, August 28, 1931, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miuytan Nakhagah G. Gulbenkiani Hrajarakani Hartsi Shurj* [On the Resignation of the AGBU Head G. Gulbenkian] (Yerevan, 1996), 87.

<sup>256</sup> From Istanbul “Armenian Danger,” *Berliner Tagesblatt*, January 2, 1932, cited in *Harach*, January 6, 1932.

<sup>257</sup> A leading ARF member, Nicole Aghbalyan, whose initials this brochure claimed used to live in Alexandria (and not Cairo) previously. However, in 1930 he had moved to Beirut where he established together with Levaon Shant the “Armenian Jemaran” (the Armenian College). He remained in Beirut until his death (1947).

Soviet Armenia, and hindering their departure from places close to their homeland... He then spoke of the mandate, which ought to be preserved because the French and the Armenians were the correct civilizational force to guide the Syrians.<sup>258</sup>

The brochure contained generalized Orientalist views depicting Christian Armenians as civilized as opposed to the Muslims. Hence, the author claimed that Syrians did not consider Armenians as “guests” but had invited them to Syria to guide them... Other repeatedly mentioned ideas included: Armenians were accepted in Syria thanks to French hospitality and did not have any political roles. However, there was also the contentious claim that Armenians could have achieved autonomy in Syria if they had only wished. In fact, this was not the case, for Armenians did not have any such aspirations.

*Arev*, which criticized both the writer and the ideas expressed, was astonished that the author could believe that such declarations could right a wrong impression when they provided more ground for the Syrians to believe that there was an ongoing undercover Armenian “national home” project in Syria.<sup>259</sup> The establishment of a few hundred poor refugees in the borderland was far from being a “national home,” instead it served as a pretext for the Turkish and Syrian nationalists to create the myth of the Armenian “national home.” If the author had had the objective to “repair the eyebrow” now he had also “destroyed the eye.” Finally, *Arev* claimed that a nation could only have one homeland. If it had several homelands, then, in effect, it had none. The ARF members evidently preferred the latter option, for they considered Soviet Armenia a dangerous precipice; thus, all calls of the Soviet leaders should be ignored.<sup>260</sup>

Effectively, the brochure’s publication renewed the debates about the “Armenian home” in Syria. According to an Armenian notable from Beirut, the ideas discussed in the brochure were paradoxical because even someone with a superficial understanding of the Armenians’ situation in Syria would find it incorrect. The author tried to prove that Armenians were at home in Syria and were entitled to establish a “national home” there. He also stated how angry most of the Armenian circles were.<sup>261</sup>

Clearly, the brochure aimed to pretend to present the views of the ARF, and its author to be a certain Nicol. An effort had been made to hint that “Nicol” was none else but Nicol Aghbalian, a leading ARF member and the former ministry education in the First Armenian Republic. Curiously, even the ARF outlets, *Azduk* and *Husaber* were angrily denouncing it

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<sup>258</sup> Editorial, “Druz Terti Me Khratnere” [The Advice of a Druze Paper], *Arev*, October 10, 1932, 2; Editorial, “Honk Shinelu Tegh...” [Instead of Correcting the Eyebrow...], *Arev*, October 11, 1932, 2.

<sup>259</sup> Editorial, “Honk Shinelu Tegh.”

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> CADN-SL 574, Service de la presse, Note d’un notable arménien de Beyrouth, 28 octobre 1932.

either as a Bolshevik or a Turkish plot to create suspicions about the Armenians before both the mandatory power and the local government. Everyone was curious to find out who the author was. French diplomatic records reveal that the brochure was secretly edited in Ankara in Arabic and smuggled to Aleppo. One hundred and fifty copies were distributed to Dr. Kayyali and Jemal Ibrahim pasha. Moreover, we learn that *Halk Sesi* of Mardin (March 14) pretended that it was *Al-Qabas* that had published it first and sent one copy to *Halk Sesi*.<sup>262</sup> Curiously enough, this brochure is still found in all the major Armenian libraries in Armenia and throughout the diaspora and is widely cited today to “expose the disastrous ARF policy in the service of the imperialists against the Armenian workers.” There is no doubt that the spread of the brochure and the encouragement to cite it widely was due to the Soviets, for whom the brochure was an excellent means to “expose the Dashnaks.”<sup>263</sup>

Articles with similar orientalist tones had previously appeared in the ARF papers. *Pyunik*, for example, had praised the French authorities, “thanks to whom Syria and Lebanon were on their way to progress.”<sup>264</sup> In these articles, everything European (or French) was considered good and *civilizing*.<sup>265</sup> *Pyunik* usually reserved a place for the Armenian refugees in these civilizing efforts. “Armenians shall assist with all their capacities in the development of Syria. As Armenians for centuries have been an element of civilization and peace in the Middle East, how lucky they (Syrians) are to have both.”<sup>266</sup> These sentiments were why the brochure was considered “real” at the time and is still thought to be authentic today.

Interestingly, *Azduk*'s publication, which put the entire responsibility for the brochure on the Turks, had prompted a response from a Druze paper, *Sedo al-Sahel*, titled “What to do to face the Turkish danger.” The author agreed with the notion expressed in the ARF organ that a Turkish danger threatened not only the Armenians but also the Syrians. According to him, Turkey did not wish to see a stronger Syria since it cherished hopes to become the mandatory power of Syria once France was weakened.<sup>267</sup> Thus, the Turkish threat was real. Therefore,

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<sup>262</sup> CADN-SL 1771, Sûreté Générale Beyrouth, N:1616, (sûreté générale Alep, avril 7), “La Syrie et Nous,” 10 avril 1933.

<sup>263</sup> This brochure is cited in Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*; Hovhannisyan et al, *Sirian Ankakhutyan Hamar Mghvats Paykarum* (Yerevan, 1974); Margaryan, *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun Hetevanqov Siriyum Hastatvats Hay Taragirneri Kargavijake ev Hay-Arabakan Pokkharaberutyunnere (1915-1924)* (Yerevan, 2013); Abrahamyan, “Citizen Strangers.”

<sup>264</sup> “Zoravar Sarrail” [General Sarrail], *Pyunik*, January 3, 1925, 1.

<sup>265</sup> Similar observations are made by Joel Veldkamp in his research on the Jewish community of Aleppo, and the attitude of Alliance Israélite Universelle toward the French, see the unpublished paper, “So that We Can Safeguard Your Lives:” The Jews of Aleppo between Colonialism, Nationalism, and Zionism, 1918-1946,” presented in MESA Annual Meeting, December 2021 (virtual).

<sup>266</sup> “Zoravar Sarrail.”

<sup>267</sup> Editorial, “Druz Terti Me Khratnere.”

there was a need for a common Armenian-Arab-Druze front. The cooperation of the Arab and the Armenian communists was given as exemplary. There were also many other collaboration examples. One example was the Armenian willingness to support the Muslim victims during the Syrian Revolt. Rapprochement and sincerity were needed to prevent both nations from falling victim to the Great Powers, and other enemies.<sup>268</sup> *Arev* revealed that because the author had praised the Armenian and Arab communist cooperation, the paper was soon censored and shut down by the French authorities.<sup>269</sup> It was telling that the Arabic language newspaper praising the former Armenian-Arab cooperation and calling for stronger collaboration, was shut down by the French authorities immediately. This is yet another proof of our earlier argument that the French authorities deliberately prevented any rapprochement between the Armenian refugees and other communities, especially Muslim ones.

According to *Hayrenik*, the ARF organ of Boston, the Turkish influence on both political and press campaigns was quite strong and effective in Syria because of the common religion. Both Turkey and the National Bloc were against the French mandate. According to Turkey, it was the French presence that encouraged and allowed the Armenian presence on the borderlands. This, and the Turkish desire to annex Alexandretta, including Antioch, nourished the anti-French discourse in which the Armenian refugees were always presented as the community sustaining the French presence. According to *Hayrenik*, Syrian nationalists shared the Turkish views. This is how *Hayrenik* explained the tendency of both the Turkish and Syrian nationalist papers to print the same articles about the Armenians, each nourishing the other, citing the other, and often basing their arguments on information transmitted by travelers. Usually, *Al-Nida* printed the news first, followed by *Ahd al-Jadid* and then the Turkish language press. In these articles, telegrams received from Geneva were used to show that the French presence and the refugee settlement went together.<sup>270</sup>

The Turkish press was undoubtedly an important source with a considerable impact on both the Syrian nationalist press and Moscow. It amplified the fears and exaggerated the suspicions of the USSR authorities in a skillful way that was beneficial to Turkey. The next chapter aims to reveal through concrete examples how the Turkish press campaigns were successful and how they impacted certain USSR policies vis-à-vis the Armenians.

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<sup>268</sup> CADN-SL 574, Service de la presse, Note pour Le Conseiller aux relations exterieures, Articles du journal "Azdak" *Beyruth*, 8 octobre 1932. We have been unable to consult this article.

<sup>269</sup> Editorial, "Druz Terti Me Khratnere."

<sup>270</sup> A. Arshakuni, "Hayeru Teghavorume Ev Arab Azgaynakan Kusaktsutyune" [The Settlement of the Armenians and the Syrian Nationalist Party], *Hayrenik*, May 12, 1931.

## The USSR and the Armenian “national home” in Syria

On April 29, 1931, *Zarya Vostoka* of Tbilisi, the official organ of the Trans-Caucasian Federation, published an article on its front page titled “The political intrigues of the imperialists on the borders of Trans-Caucasus,” accompanied by a map. This article appeared only three months after the series of publications in *Milliyet*, connecting all the missing pieces of the puzzle. It cited the Lebanese *Al-Ahrar*,<sup>271</sup> based on certain secret documents.<sup>272</sup> The main arguments were merely the articles from *Milliyet* discussed earlier, showing how well the Soviet authorities had swallowed the Turkish bait.

According to the Armenian historian Dallakyan, neither *Zaria Vostoka* nor *Khorherdayin Hayastan* knew anything about the articles of *Milliyet* and had learned these rumors from the Syrian and Lebanese press. In our view, however, this was a strategic decision by the Soviet authorities to cite the Arabic instead of the Turkish press. Moreover, *Al-Ahrar*, as we already know, was not an unbiased paper. It is unclear on whose instructions, Soviet or Turkish, the article in *Al-Ahrar* had appeared.



Figure 14. Taken from the *Zaria Vostoka*, April 29, 1931, 1

<sup>271</sup> It must be noted that in the original article instead of “*Al-Ahrar*”, it is mentioned *Lebanese Al-Ahram*. In Lebanon there was no paper named “*Al-Ahram*” instead, there were two other papers with names closer to it “*Al-Ahrar*”- the editor was G. Tuéni and had 6,000 prints, the remarks done by the French intelligence authorities were the following “the organ of the francs-maçons, opposition, always criticizing the administration”. “*Al-Ahwal*” – the editor was Simon Seif (had 2000 prints). The director of the paper was Khalil Badawi who was condemned twice by the French for the publications against the mandate. See CADN-SL 1588, “Liste des journaux et revues paraissant en Syrie et au Liban”, Decembre 1930. A paper with the name “*Al-Ahram*” was published in Alexandria (Egypt), the editor was Mahmoud Al-Fath. It is unclear if the misspelling on *Zaria Vostoka* was done by mistake or purposefully. Considering the connections between the Soviet authorities and the editors of the “*Al-Ahrar*” as well as its previous provocative publications, we think that the paper referred in *Zaria Vostoka* is “*Al-Ahrar*”.

<sup>272</sup> *Al-Ahrar* had published an article in March 18, 1931, where it had reprinted the *Milliyet*’s article.

*Al-Ahrar* first reported about a trip by Kiril Romanov, a surviving member of the Russian Imperial family, to Syria and Palestine. The paper explicitly stated that Kiril was coordinating the White Russian movements to organize a coup d'état against the Bolsheviks. Such an intervention was in preparation on two different fronts – Poland and Latvia and the Armeno-Kurdish front. Kiril's latest visit to Syria had been about the latter. The paper then mentioned the failed Kurdish rebellion of 1925, the alleged British connections, the recent ARF-Khoybun cooperation to “liberate Armenia and Kurdistan,” and an alleged agreement between Kiril and *Nubar* (AGBU). According to the latter, Kiril was to restore the borders of Armenia as agreed in 1904 in Baku. In exchange, Armenians were to organize uprisings in the Caucasus, support the Kurds in their rebellions, and undertake pro-monarchist propaganda. The visit of several leading ARF figures, including to Beirut in May 1931 to attend the opening ceremony of the new Armenian college, was presented as evidence of these secret plots. Why otherwise had they toured Syria and Iraq before returning to Paris? At the beginning of 1931, Vahan Papazian, too, headed to Paris to participate in an important congress. Meanwhile, Kiril's visit to Syria was intended to seal the final agreement.<sup>273</sup>

Hence, this explains the anxiousness of the Soviets in both Armenia and Moscow. From this article, it becomes clear that all the sworn enemies of the Soviet authorities were united in one single anti-Soviet front, including the White Russians, the toppled Tsar's relatives, the British, and the untrustworthy Kurdish and Armenian groups whose national aspirations had not been satisfied. Moreover, for the first time, this article mentioned a new enemy – *Nubar* and the AGBU – an organization that was allowed to operate in Soviet Armenia.

On May 4, 1931, merely five days after the publication of *Zarya Boctoka*, the same message was splashed over the entire front page of the *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, the official organ of the Soviet Armenian government, in bold type. The opening title shouted in large letters, “ARF, hand-in-hand with the Russian monarchists and the Kurdish sheiks and with encouragement from the imperialists, prepares an anti-Soviet intervention. The workers of Soviet Armenia, united with all the workers and headed by the communist party, shall cut any hand directed at the Soviet country.” Below the text was a message from Aghasi Khanjyan, the head of Soviet Armenia, who advised being “Much more careful, more vigilant.” Khanjyan began his article by citing the news reported by *Al-Ahrar*, which had uncovered the hidden layers of the anti-Soviet front led by the British and French.

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<sup>273</sup> “Politechiykiye Intrigi Imperalisma y Granits Zakavkaz’a” [The Political Intrigues of the Imperialists on the Borders of Trans-Caucasus], *Zarya Boctoka*, April 29, 1931, 1.

In these games, the ARF took a leading role, which, of course, surprised no one in Soviet Armenia. Then, numerous explanations were provided to show how ARF had been the tool in the hands of Russian and European imperialists since its inception. The author then claimed that the ARF had been integrated into the British and French spying networks long ago. Several proofs were presented; a small group of leading ARF figures had settled in Romania, which was an important anti-Soviet platform, while others toured the cities of Syria, Iraq, and Iran under the pretext of “cultural work.” In these countries, hundreds of Armenian refugees were denounced as communists and jailed or used as “fighting brigades” simply because they hindered the imperialists’ plans in the Middle East. The ARF leaders did not even hide that the “Bolshevik regime could only be destroyed by force,” announcing it openly from the stage of the II International Socialist Congress, which had taken place in Zurich in 1930.<sup>274</sup> Such declarations aimed to prepare public opinion for an anti-Soviet military intervention. The ARF and its imperialist allies operated tirelessly on the Soviet borders and within the country. Khanjyan then mentioned several small peasant protests that had taken place in 1930 in different regions of Armenia (against the forced collectivization) as directed and staged by ARF. The protests were brutally suppressed. The signs were clear that ARF and its imperialist allies aimed to cut off the entire Caucasus from the USSR, taking control over oil-rich Baku.

The ARF’s direct participation in the Kurdish rebellion was another example. The party wished to create a solid anti-Soviet military platform under the auspices of the British and the French by creating an independent Kurdistan to provide a gateway to the Caucasus and Baku. No one doubted that the entire Kurdish movement had been financed and supported by the British as well as the monarchist Kiril Romanov and Papazian (Koms) while the Armenian millionaire Nubar (AGBU) was also involved financially.<sup>275</sup>

*Al-Ahrar’s* article provided a clear illustration for the Soviet authorities as to why such terms as “Greater Armenia” or “Independent Kurdistan” had begun to trend suddenly. They claimed that Nubar had brokered a secret agreement between the ARF and Kiril to proclaim Kiril the King of Kurdistan and Armenia. For the Soviet authorities, Kiril was the obvious candidate of the French imperialists. There was no coincidence that Kiril had recently traveled to Syria, where he had talks with the ARF leaders headed by Aharonyan. Moreover, it was no coincidence that, in parallel, a high-level Armenian Congress had been invited to Paris. Thus, France, which was already leading the anti-Soviet front in Poland and Romania, now wished to

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<sup>274</sup> Soviet authorities were also disturbed that on the initiative of ARF this Congress had publicly accused the repressions of the Turkish government in violence against the Kurds, see in Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde*, 229.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

open another in the Middle East. The French and British wished to revive their former plans to have an anti-Soviet buffer zone between Turkey, the USSR, and Iran in the form of independent Kurdistan and Armenia, as foreseen previously in the Treaty of Sèvres.<sup>276</sup>

All this news was alarming for Moscow because these alleged meetings happened at a time when France had accused the USSR of dumping, interpreted in the Soviet capital as a new means to harm the Soviet economy.<sup>277</sup> Moreover, France was trying to position Syria as a major transportation hub to improve the French position in the region. These fears were real; a secret and “urgent” circular (N:230-1) was sent from the Central Office of the Communist Party to Soviet Armenia, urging all the communist ruling bodies “to immediately mobilize the working masses... against the imminent imperialist intervention against the USSR.”<sup>278</sup>

According to Dallakyan, it was no coincidence that the same news was published in Tbilisi and Yerevan almost simultaneously. He contended that party superiority prevailed, and Yerevan had to reprint whatever was announced in Moscow or Tbilisi; it was an obligation. This explains why this news took absolute priority over other pressing internal issues. One such urgent issue was the devastating earthquake in the south of Armenia on April 27, just two days before *Zarya Vostoka*'s publication leaving thousands of people homeless. The earthquake was so strong that Moscow allocated 2 million rubles for disaster relief.<sup>279</sup> What is more, not only did *Khorherdayin Hayastan* not mention anything about the earthquake but, on the next day, it reported on numerous workers' demonstrations in defense of the USSR.<sup>280</sup> These demonstrations lasted for two months.<sup>281</sup> Once they were over, a quote from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* was splashed over the front page of the *Khorherdayin Hayastan* on June 27, 1931. The entire article was reprinted, accompanied by a lengthy editorial calling for caution and citing the German paper's one expression that “ARF had insisted on their right for an ‘Armenian national home’ in northern Syria.”<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Aghasi Khanjyan, “Aveli Zgast, Aveli Achalurj,” “Keghtvact Kaghakarter” [More Careful, More Vigilant], [Forged Playing Cards], *Khorhdayin Hayastan*, May 4, 1931, 1-2.

<sup>277</sup> A.M. P. “Tntesakan Paykare Khorhrdayin Miutyam Dem” [The Economic Struggle Against the USSR], *Ibid*, January 10, 1931, 1.

<sup>278</sup> HAA fond 1, list 11, file 190, 90, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyam*, 54.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, 73-74.

<sup>280</sup> “Mayis Mekyan Zoratse Kapitalistakan Ashkharhum Tsutsadrets Komunizmi Ajogh Hzorutyune” [The May First Celebrations Showed the Capitalisms the Growing Force of the Communists], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, May 5, 1931, 1.

<sup>281</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyam*, 77

<sup>282</sup> “Dashnaktutyam Aryunot Daveru Mi Nor Merkatcum: ‘Frankfurter Zeitung’ Kerdakan Hartsı ev Haykakan Hakaheghapokhakan Kusaktsuytuneneri Deri Masin” [Another New Exposure of ARF's Bloody Plots: ‘Frankfurter Zeitung’ about the Kurdish Movement and the Armenian Anti-Revolutionary Political Parties], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, June 27, 1931, 1.



This “national home” in Syria was taking another dimension given the alleged involvement of another powerful player – the AGBU and its head Nubar, who was now listed among the Soviet enemies. The next chapter aims to reveal the “AGBU danger.”

### **The AGBU and the “Armenian home” in Syria**

The next layer that greatly worried the Soviet Armenian authorities was the potential ARF-Ramkavar rapprochement and the creation of a pan-diasporic center. As we have discussed in earlier chapters, Soviet authorities favored divided Armenian communities abroad so they could play one off against the other.

As it happened, the calls to revive the discussions for the creation of a pan-diasporic centralized body were happening in 1929, right after the Soviet authorities had cut all their ties with the Ramkavars and the Henschaks. The ARF’s influential members were quite vocal in suggesting solutions. Sasuni described the situation as “national chaos,” calling for the urgent convening of a national organization, while another ARF bureau member proposed the creation of a single diasporic body.<sup>283</sup> More alarmingly, Ramkavars also joined the chorus, saying it was essential to find one person who exercised considerable authority over all the Armenians to fulfill the task. By contrast, the creation of any such diasporic central body was interpreted by the Soviets as the realization of the much-propagated *homeland without territoriality*.<sup>284</sup> Since calls for this centralized body were happening at the time when ARF-Ramkavar circles had intensified their efforts to overcome their rivalry, the alleged “Armenian home” in the Syrian Jazira was taking another dimension in the suspicious eyes of the Soviet authorities.

The fact that Khatisyan, the former ARF prime minister, was recently invited to speak at the opening ceremony of the Nubar Library in Paris was seen as another proof that there was a coordinated action between the ARF and AGBU regarding the “Armenian home.”<sup>285</sup> Another unusual event had been the speech of an AGBU member at the May 28 celebrations (the independence of the Armenian Republic) in Athens. Until now, AGBU had traditionally celebrated this event on November 29 (the Sovietization of Armenia) with the other pro-Soviet forces.<sup>286</sup> Yet another suspicious act was the visit of Chobanian to Romania. *Banvor*, the communist organ of the USA, reported that Chobanian gave a lecture about medieval Armenia,

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<sup>283</sup> Cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miuytan*, 115-116.

<sup>284</sup> HAA archives, fond 178, list 2, file 66, 66-88, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miuytan*, 51.

<sup>285</sup> G. M. “Baregortsakane ev H.Y.D. Ojakhe” [The AGBU’s and the ARF’s Home), *Yerevan*, June 27, 1929, 1.

<sup>286</sup> ARF celebrated the independence of Armenia on 28 May, when the first ARF ruled Republic was established, while pro-Soviet forces celebrated the independence on 29 November, the day when Armenia was Sovietized.

which was attended by Romania's prime minister and war minister. On the European front, Romania and Poland were the two countries where the USSR expected plots to be hatched. This visit, then, was interpreted as an integral part of the plot along with the "Armenian home" in Syria, for which huge funds had been allocated by the AGBU.<sup>287</sup>

The ARF and Ramkavar leaders did, indeed, try to end their years-long confrontation by intensifying meetings. On July 30, 1930, Shavarsh Misakian (ARF) and Artak Darbinian (Ramkavar) met in person, after which negotiations started and lasted for months.<sup>288</sup> Among the most important questions were the attitude of Soviet Armenia and Turkey, ARF relations with the Kurds, and the settlement of the Armenian refugees in Syria.<sup>289</sup> Crucially the central figure behind the reconciliation efforts was Gulbenkian, a well-known wealthy Armenian famous for his close ties with the "imperialists."

Such efforts were intensified, especially after he was appointed the head of the AGBU in October 1930. One of his priorities was the consolidation of the entire diaspora. According to Malezian, the acting director of AGBU, Gulbenkian was almost sure that he would succeed, and he had negotiations with leading ARF figures, such as Khatisyan and Aharonyan.<sup>290</sup>

Gulbenkian had reportedly suggested different means to achieve this rapprochement, even suggesting some leading ARF members become members of AGBU.<sup>291</sup> If such rapprochement were achieved, a kind of "National Assembly" would probably be created to represent all the Ottoman Armenians. This was unacceptable for the Soviet authorities, not only because they believed it was directed at Soviet Armenia but also because any such united body would evade Soviet control. Hence, Soviet authorities employed all kinds of tactics to prevent such an outcome.<sup>292</sup> In fact, certain communist organs did not even hide their delight that divided Armenian communities were the reality everywhere and that the divisions were achieved thanks to their consistent struggle.<sup>293</sup> Such fears were especially justified in the light of the recent deterioration in the Soviet authorities' relations with the Ramkavars, which had been orchestrated on purpose by the Soviets themselves. No wonder then that Soviet Armenia employed all kinds of tactics to hinder any ARF-Ramkavar rapprochement.

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<sup>287</sup> "Arshak Chobanian, Gulbenkiani Gortsakale, Hay Gaghtakanneru Aryune Ke Sakarke Varchapet Jorkayi Het" [Arshak Chobanian - Gulbenkian's Agent Negotiates the Blood of the Armenian Workers with the Primer Jorkayi], *Banvor*, cited in "Ramkavarnu Ushadrutyanyan" [To the Attention of the Ramkavars], *Harach* May 3, 1932.

<sup>288</sup> Minutes of meetings of Ramkavar Central Body, 1929-1931, 181, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miuytan*, 50.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> AGBU archives, fond Press, diverse, A group of veterans, "Azdaragir: Ughetsuyts H.B.E. Miuytan Anirazek Joghovakannerun" (Khorhrdakan, Voch-hratarakeli) [For Consultation Only], March 25, 1957, 2.

<sup>291</sup> Nubar Library, fond Press items and diverse, Malezian.

<sup>292</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miuytan*, 51.

<sup>293</sup> See for example *Arshav* (Paris) December 10, 17, 1932, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miuytan*, 51.

According to Malezian, Gulbenkian's call for consolidation was misinterpreted. During the negotiations, Gulbenkian himself came to understand that it was impossible to come to terms with the ARF, who put forward unacceptable conditions.<sup>294</sup>

After the failed rapprochement attempts, a new press campaign started in which each side blamed the other for being the main cause of disunity in the colonies and in Syria, in particular.<sup>295</sup> This struggle was at its height between 1931 and 1932. Crucially for the AGBU, it was not only the ARF organs that attacked the organization mercilessly but sometimes even the Ramkavars paper (*Apapga, Arev, Paykar*). The reason given by Malezian was AGBU's refusal to fund these papers, a mistake that AGBU corrected afterward.<sup>296</sup>

Although the Ramkavars still adhered to their earlier program to cooperate with the HOK and facilitate repatriations, their relations stalled in 1929 and would cease completely from 1931.<sup>297</sup> Prior to 1929, Soviet-Ramkavar relations had already cooled due to their separate fundraising efforts. At the end of 1926, AGBU launched a large fundraising campaign.<sup>298</sup> At this point, Soviet Armenia was still regarded as the only realistic and radical solution to the refugee settlement issue. Therefore, it was decided to use the newly raised funds for the construction of a special town in Soviet Armenia to be called Nubarashen in honor of Nubar.<sup>299</sup> Construction was planned to start in the spring of 1929 and be finalized by the end of 1930. Although the launch campaign looked promising, the work did not progress as hoped, and construction did not start until 1932.<sup>300</sup>

The large fundraising campaign generated much enthusiasm among the Armenian colonies. Even Nansen joined the campaign upon Nubar's invitation as a way of compensating for his failed Eriwan settlement scheme.<sup>301</sup>

Soviet Armenian authorities regarded the AGBU campaign with hostility since it competed with their own fundraising efforts. A high-ranking Armenian official even suggested reviewing the permission for the construction of Nubarashen. He also suggested encouraging a

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<sup>294</sup> Edourd Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent Union in Soviet Armenia, 1923-1937*, translated by Artashes Emin (Fundamental Armeniology, N:1:9, 2019), 66.

<sup>295</sup> The press campaign between ARF and AGBU can be found in the AGBU archives, Coupures de presse, Document divers.

<sup>296</sup> Malezian, *Paykar*, December 4, 1941 in AGBU archives, fond Press, Document Divers.

<sup>297</sup> Such a decision was confirmed in the Ramkavar's 3<sup>rd</sup> (1926) and 4<sup>th</sup> (1929) congresses.

<sup>298</sup> More on this, see in Tachjian, "Humanitarian Diaspora?."

<sup>299</sup> More on the construction of Nubarashen, see Ibid, 119.

<sup>300</sup> HAA archives, fond 178, list 1, file 534, 7-8.

<sup>301</sup> The outcome of the fundraising was not satisfactory. AGBU archives, fond "Arménie Soviétique: Oeuvres de l'Union, repatriements, Relations avec Yerevan, 1922-1937," Nansen to Nubar, July 17, 1928.

press campaign that would make the fundraising fail, enabling the Soviet authorities to confiscate all the collected funds for Soviet Armenia instead.<sup>302</sup>

The Great Depression, on the other hand, hindered the speedy collection of the required funds.<sup>303</sup> In order to overcome the budgetary shortage, the Nubar-Nansen tandem tried to get a small loan from the LoN member states, while Nansen entered new negotiations with the Soviet authorities. In his letter to Nubar, Nansen spoke about the importance of having “our person” in Armenia to oversee the settlement of “our refugees,” which was to avoid the tragic fate of the Mesopotamia refugees, most of whom had succumbed to malaria.<sup>304</sup> Eventually, the loan was rejected by the Soviet government, because of its small size and the feeling that an oversight control was being imposed. The AGBU funds were preferable because they were a donation and were under no outside control. The construction of Nubarashen finally began in 1931 and progressed with great difficulty. By September 1936, only 100 houses had been constructed even though the AGBU had spent 417,000 dollars.<sup>305</sup>

By contrast, the Armenian settlements in northern Syria flourished. Soon the news arrived that thousands of Armenian refugees were to be transferred from Greece to Syria. With this information, all Soviet suspicions reached their climax; an Armenian “national home” was effectively in the making in Syria under the auspices of the French mandatory power and the LoN, which, they thought, was also endorsed by the ARF and the AGBU.

### **Suspicious endorsements**

The fears of the Soviet authorities doubled when Greece, badly hit by the economic crisis, renewed its efforts to get rid of its remaining Armenian refugees. After all, in 1925, merely 3,000 persons were transferred to Soviet Armenia instead of the promised 10,000. Meanwhile, the number of Armenian refugees in Greece was reduced by half; at the beginning of the 1930s, there were no more than 30,000. In January 1930, the Greek government demanded that the LoN should officially remove the remaining Armenian refugees from Greece and relocate them. An aggressive press campaign was launched to make the transfer a reality.<sup>306</sup>

To no avail, the Central Armenian Refugee Committee of Paris pleaded with the Soviet authorities, asking them to accept a few hundred refugees from Greece and suggesting that they

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<sup>302</sup> HAA archives, communist fond 1, list 8, 13-17, N: 64 signed by Senaryan, April 27, 1928.

<sup>303</sup> Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 37.

<sup>304</sup> AGBU archives, fond “Armenie Sovietique : Oeuvres de l’Union, letter de Nansen à S.E. Nubar, (undated).

<sup>305</sup> Vahé Tachjian, “Humanitarian Diaspora?,” 120.

<sup>306</sup> “Hunastani Haykakan Gaghute, 1930” [The Armenians in Greece, 1930], *Paykar*, January 18, 1931.

should at least host those who practiced required professions.<sup>307</sup> Once it was clear that the Soviet leaders would not respond favorably to these pleas, the AGBU leaders turned to other options. Against this backdrop, Gulbenkian entered negotiations with the French mandatory authorities and the LoN, inquiring about the possibilities of transferring a few thousand refugees to Syria. In fact, in March 1931, the Ramkavar seventh deputy congress had already decided to prioritize the repatriation of refugees to Armenia or the territories nearby. Since Armenia could not host all the refugees, Syria was identified as the second-best solution.<sup>308</sup> Both LoN and the French authorities agreed to transfer up to 15,000 Armenian refugees from Greece to Syria. Pashalian was asked to make the transfers discreetly, without any publicity, and in small groups to avoid attention from the Syrian nationalists.<sup>309</sup>

Gulbenkian, in his turn, used his connections at Quai d'Orsay and met with Ponsot in Paris. The two discussed the conditions of the Armenian refugee camps in Beirut and Aleppo as well as the conditions of the Armenian refugees in Greece.<sup>310</sup> On June 24, 1931, Gulbenkian organized a dinner at his Paris mansion where he hosted Ponsot and other high-level guests from the French foreign ministry.<sup>311</sup> In the following days, Gulbenkian had other meetings with high officials from Nansen's LoN office, including Max Huber, secretary Major Johnson, and Burnier.<sup>312</sup> As a result of these meetings, it was decided to give priority to the transfer of a few hundred orphans from Greece to Syria as well as to setting 3,000 homeless families in Syria. Afterward, the final and permanent settlement of about 30,000 Armenian refugees still in the camps in Aleppo and Beirut was to be addressed by joint efforts, whereby AGBU committed to financing half the settlement costs. It was also decided that AGBU would allocate 1,500 sterling financial aid for the construction of an Armenian village in Syria.<sup>313</sup>

Moreover, the minutes of the AGBU board meeting of July 1, 1931, reveal that a decision was taken "to participate more actively in the settlement efforts of the refugees in Syria under the auspices of the LoN."<sup>314</sup> For Tachjian, this was a major reorientation for the AGBU that

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<sup>307</sup> The letter of Central Armenian Refugee Committee to Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan, April 21, 1931, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyun*, 63-65, see also "Hunastani ev Surio Gaghtakannere ev Miutyun Teghapokhman Dzernarknere" [Armenian Refugees in Greece and Syria and the AGBU's Settlement Initiatives], *Miutyun*, N: 149, June-July, 1931, 1-2.

<sup>308</sup> The decisions of the Ramkavar Western Europe 7<sup>th</sup> Deputy Meeting, 24-25 March 1931, Paris, 4, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyun*, 54, fn. 18.

<sup>309</sup> Archives of the Central Armenian Refugee Committee, Minutes, 1931-1939, Meeting May 1, 1931.

<sup>310</sup> "Hunastani ev Surio Gaghtakannere," *Miutyun*, June-July, 1-2.

<sup>311</sup> These meetings were not secret, see *Ibid*, also *Harach*, July 25, 1931, *Kamq* (Detroit) September 8, 1931, 10.

<sup>312</sup> Tachjian, "Des camps de réfugiés aux quartiers urbains" in *Les Arméniens, la quête d'un refuge, 1917-1939*, ed., Raymond Kévorkian, et. al. (Beirut, Presses de l'université Saint-Joseph, 2006), 134.

<sup>313</sup> G. Gulbenkian, "Hayastani Nergaghte, Gaghtakanneru Teghavorume" [Repatriation to Armenia: The Settlement of the Refugees], Paris, September 30, 1931 in *Miutyun*, Nov-Dec, 1931, 164.

<sup>314</sup> Cited in Tachjian, "Des camps de réfugiés aux quartiers urbains," 134.

meant shifting major human and financial support from Soviet Armenia to Syria. This shift would ultimately give a new dimension to the settlement efforts in Syria and Lebanon, which were threatened by the economic crises. This new phase was called by Tachjian “*la phase ultime du projet d’établissement*.”<sup>315</sup>

The August-September 1931 issue of *Miutyun* proudly announced that “Thanks to the decisive actions and personal connections of Gulbenkian, a new settlement plan is in place to solve the issue of 5,000 refugees in Greece and 15,000 in Syria.” The paper further revealed that on July 22, 1931, the AGBU board had decided to commit the requested financial means to realize this project. “We consider this our biggest and most important initiative that will transform the conditions of *our refugees* in *Greece* and *Syria*. And despite the current economic crisis... to enable the settlement of the refugees.”<sup>316</sup>

On July 25, 1931, an agreement was concluded between the AGBU and the LoN for both projects. It was decided to transfer from Greece only the neediest, in small groups and discreetly, giving priority to those with relatives in Syria.<sup>317</sup> In fact, AGBU had favored the French Jaziran settlement site even before the demand from the Greek government. In the confidential minutes of the meeting convened in Geneva on December 2, 1929, which we have discussed earlier, there are some interesting insights in this regard. Right after Le Nail, the floor was taken by Pashalian, who had declared that the Syrian Jazira settlement plan had been discussed by all the Armenian organizations (?) who were wholly in favor of it. He had also used the opportunity to plead for urgent and immediate relief to the newly arrived refugees and did not forget to mention that AGBU was to launch a worldwide fundraising campaign in 1931 “for the exclusive purpose of obtaining funds for the *Syrian Settlement Scheme*.”<sup>318</sup>

Special attention must be given to Pashalian’s statement that *all* the Armenian organizations agreed on the Jazira settlement plan. In fact, the settlement in northern Syria had initially found few supporters among the Armenian refugees for several reasons. It was perceived as a death blow to be so close to the Turkish border, surrounded by a hostile Muslim majority, and far away from the important urban centers. In addition, at least three other reasons were identified: the lack of necessary funds, the impossibility of ensuring an adequate defense,

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> “Tsragir Gaghtakanneru Teghavorman; H.B.E. Miutyune Laynoren Ke Masnatsi” [Refugee Settlement project, the AGBU Participates Actively], *Miutyun*, August-September 1931, 1-2. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>317</sup> “Batstrutyun me Muiyan Nakhagahin Hrajarakani Bun Patjrin Nkatmamb” [An Explanation about the Real Reason Behind the Resignation of the AGBU’s Head], *Miutyun*, N :156, July-August 1932, 57-58.

<sup>318</sup> CADN-SL 575, Confidential note, Advisory Committee for Refugees. Meeting of the Armenian Central Committee of Refugees held at the International Labor Office, Geneva, 2 December 2, 1929. (Emphasized by the author).

and the fact that it was unrealistic to group all the Armenian refugees in a single location since most of them were merchants and artisans.<sup>319</sup> Even, Sahak II had voiced his concerns over such plans, “If the aim is to disperse the Armenian refugees among the locals – it is both immoral and economically disastrous.”<sup>320</sup> As for the Soviet Armenian historians, they saw in the establishment of these villages scattered among the semi-nomadic populations, yet another French attempt to create inter-sectarian conflict between the Armenians and Arabs, this time in Jazira.<sup>321</sup> AGBU and other Armenian philanthropic organizations had decidedly opted for cooperation considering the economic crisis and the precarious conditions of the refugees on the one hand and the favorable attitude of both LoN and the French mandate authorities on the other. It is important to note that by endorsing this settlement, Armenian political circles did not pursue any political agenda, that is the creation of a new “homeland.” We think Pachalian’s declarations about “all” the Armenian organizations aimed to make a deep impression in Geneva, in reality he represented only the AGBU.

Independently from the Refugee Committee, the ARF leaders also attempted to find a solution for the Armenian refugees from Greece by transferring 10,000 to Syria upon the request of the ARF office in Greece. French intelligence reported a meeting organized by Vahan Papazian to discuss the letters received from Greece and the possibility of negotiating with the High Commissioner.<sup>322</sup> The ARF’s attitude towards the Syrian colony was known. It attributed importance to it in terms of safeguarding the Armenian identity and because of its political significance. Syria was the biggest Armenian colony outside the USSR, was closer to the borders of the homeland (Cilicia), and “given the opportunity, would be the first to return.” Therefore, the strengthening of the Syrian colony was a priority.<sup>323</sup> The ARF also used other tactics to channel the recent refugee flow to the Syrian Jazira. *Husaber* had announced that the Syrian authorities had instructed that the newcomers should be settled in the countryside (in Jazira) even against their wishes.<sup>324</sup>

Moreover, it was obvious that the ARF was perfectly aware of its influence over the refugees and used it skillfully to demand more accountability from the French. For example, in September 1929, *Azduk* declared that the opinion of the Armenian refugees and their political leaders were to be considered for at least two reasons: refugees reimbursed for their settlements,

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<sup>319</sup> CADN-SL 573, “Rapport, sur la situation des Arméniens,” Damas, September 1929.

<sup>320</sup> HAA, fond 5, file 1, 3, cited in Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakcutyune*, 52.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>322</sup> CADN-SL 2387, Le directeur du service des renseignements du Levant, Information 666, “Les Arméniens” 10 octobre 1930.

<sup>323</sup> “Suriahay Artagaghti Artiv” [Immigration of the Armenians out of Syria], *Droshak*, December 1928, 1-2.

<sup>324</sup> Sahak II, “Koch Hayutyan” [Call to the Armenians], *Husaber*, March 18, 1930, 1.

and their leaders were the organizational force behind the settlement, who also exercised great influence over the refugees.<sup>325</sup>

Far from being a political agenda, but rather the result of the favorable circumstances as well as the willingness of the Armenian political elite to find solutions for the refugees, the Jazira settlement scheme started to take a new shape after two major Armenian players, the AGBU and the ARF, endorsed it. In doing so, these organizations pursued their own agendas, and their actions were not coordinated; therefore, it was by no means a joint endeavor. Nevertheless, their involvement assured the refugees, especially the promises of employment and full security that eventually convinced many. By endorsing the Jazira plan, ARF and AGBU had also contributed to the French settlement plan. Thus, the Syrian Jazira increasingly competed for funds and Armenian ingathering with Soviet Armenia. The mere news that thousands of Armenian refugees were to be transferred from Greece to Syria and not Soviet Armenia further undermined the legitimacy of Soviet Armenia as the only homeland.

The ARF-Soviet confrontation, which had taken on a new dimension in the light of ARF-Khoybun cooperation, was increasingly transformed into a full-blown information “war” waged in the press. The USSR, which remained largely isolated on the international stage, saw undercover plots against it everywhere. Meanwhile, Turkish press propaganda skillfully exploited Soviet fears, presenting its own “enemies” and even unrelated events as potential threats to the USSR.

The efforts of the rival ARF and AGBU to consolidate the Armenian refugees abroad were negatively interpreted by the Soviet authorities. When these two powerful players endorsed the Syrian Jazira settlement scheme in their efforts to find a solution to the Armenian refugee crisis of Greece, the “Armenian national home” in Syria took on a new dimension in the eyes of Moscow and Yerevan. Even if the success of the Jaziran settlement was in reality the favorable political circumstances and not the political agenda of these organizations, Soviet authorities feared that an Armenian “national home,” threatening Soviet rule, was discreetly in the making on the Turkish-Syrian borderlands. The Soviet authorities urgently required a strategy to destroy that home, a topic that is addressed in the next chapter.

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<sup>325</sup> *Azduk*, 7 September 1929, cited in Archives of the Central Refugee Committee, Nubar Library, Folder Press.



## Chapter IV: Soviet Armenia acts against the “Armenian home” of Syria

This chapter shows how both Moscow and Yerevan claimed the Armenian refugees by initiating “repatriation,” albeit for different reasons. It will demonstrate the impact of this unexpected repatriation call as well as its abrupt halt on the Armenian refugees in Syria. Finally, we will show how Armenian settlements prospered in Syria despite the indifference of the “self-proclaimed homeland,” successfully navigating delicate situations marked by political tensions and upheavals. In this way, the Armenian refugees of Syria transitioned from being mere “guests” to becoming rightful and loyal citizens by the time of the proclamation of Syrian independence and the end of the mandate.

### Claiming the Armenian refugees for the “homeland”

On July 1, 1931, the Armenian colonies worldwide were surprised by news of a “massive” repatriation initiative announced by the Soviet Armenian authorities. The call explicitly mentioned that 6,000 Armenian refugees from *Syria* and *Greece* were to be hosted.<sup>326</sup> This initiative was interesting in myriad ways, but mostly for its timing and the locations from which the refugees were expected to come. Although, in the end, only refugees from Greece were repatriated, since their conditions were the most serious, and no refugee left Syria at that time, it was clear that the call was part of a “mission” to fight against the “Armenian national home” in Syria.

The repatriation intentions of the Soviet Armenian authorities were revealed at the precise moment when the first preparations were underway to make the transfer of a few hundred refugees from Greece to Syria. The Soviet announcement came as a complete surprise to all the Armenian colonies. Tellingly, the call explicitly mentioned the willingness to accept 6,000 Armenian refugees from *Greece*, *Syria*, and elsewhere.<sup>327</sup> Crucially, the decision of AGBU to be actively involved in Syria and the new Soviet repatriation plans were taken on the same day – July 1, 1931. Moreover, the “massive and large-scale repatriation” to host thousands was issued just months after the devastating earthquake when thousands were left without a shelter in Armenia.

On July 2, 1931, *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, the organ of the Soviet Armenian authorities, published a lengthy conversation with Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan, the chairman of the Council of

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<sup>326</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyán*, 85.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

the People's Commissar. The latter first referred to the deteriorating economic conditions in the capitalist countries and the better living conditions in the USSR. He then mentioned how "our compatriots, workers, and peasants in *Syria, Greece, and elsewhere* are taken by famine and unemployment."<sup>328</sup> "Neither imperialist states nor the LoN had fulfilled their promises to settle *our refugees*, instead subjecting them to extreme exploitation and poverty. In addition, the militarized party of the Armenian bourgeoisie wished to sacrifice these Armenian workers in the imperialist war prepared by its direct participation and directed specifically at the *Soviet Union – the international homeland of all the workers*".<sup>329</sup> He then mentioned that the Sardarapat irrigation project (which the LoN and Nansen had failed to fund) was about to be completed (by Soviet funds), and thus, it was the right moment to organize new repatriation. The class policy was to be applied, and only truly working elements were welcomed.<sup>330</sup> The call ended with the hope that compatriotic unions would actively support the repatriation efforts along with the HOK. The AGBU was not mentioned.

One month later, *Khorherdayin Hayastan* reported about the official decision of the Soviet authorities taken on August 10, 1931, to reassume the repatriation on a larger scale despite the bourgeois governments' and their party's (ARF?) plots against Soviet Armenia.<sup>331</sup>

At the beginning of September 1931, Ter-Gabrielyan was in Paris, where he had several meetings with the AGBU and Gulbenkian. There, he mentioned that housing and employment for 6,000 refugees were to be provided. Another 4,000 refugees could be hosted if their costs were covered.<sup>332</sup> Once in Paris, Ter-Gabrielyan was honored in Gulbenkian's mansion. As testified by Malezian, Ter-Gabrielyan had asked Gulbenkian to make the first donation to guarantee the successful start of the planned repatriation. The fundraising was opened, and Gulbenkian promised a substantial sum once it was completed.<sup>333</sup>

In Paris, Ter-Gabrielyan said nothing about his government's disapproval of the transfer of refugees from Greece to Syria. Nevertheless, at the end of September, just before his departure, when still nothing was forthcoming from Gulbenkian, Ter-Gabrielyan conveyed his deep disappointment through two HOK colleagues asking for Soviet Armenia to be allocated at least

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<sup>328</sup> (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>329</sup> (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>330</sup> [Some workers from colonies will be accepted to resettle in the Soviet Armenia: Conversation with Commissar Sahak Ter- Gabrielyan], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, July 2, 1931, 1.

<sup>331</sup> *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, August 20, 1931, 1.

<sup>332</sup> Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 44.

<sup>333</sup> The Catholicos of Edjmiatsin (Soviet Armenia) Garegin Hovsepian toured the Armenian colonies a few months later to fundraise for the renovation of the main Cathedral. This time, too, Gulbenkian did not donate but promised to do so at the end of the fundraising. This episode, too, made Soviet Armenian leaders furious. Gulbenkian would commit the necessary funds (100,000 dollars) to the renovation only in 1946. See in Vahan Malezian, "Galust Gulbeniain: The Director and the AGBU," (d), *Paykar*, 7 October 1955, 1.

as many funds as *Syria*.<sup>334</sup> He also gave an interview in which *Syria* and *Greece* were mentioned again. He declared that “thanks to the unprecedented *economic progress in Soviet Armenia*, we have a great opportunity to host a large number of Armenian workers from abroad, giving priority to *Greece* and *Syria*, where Armenian workers suffer greatly from the financial crises and unemployment.”<sup>335</sup> Then, he was explicit about who was expected, “*Each (Armenian) worker shall understand that as Soviet Armenia is his homeland, Soviet Armenia’s enemies are his enemies, too.*”<sup>336</sup>

Ter-Gabrielyan made sure to mention again in bold letters that, in the coming years, *Soviet Armenia would host a few dozen thousand refugees thanks to its economic progress*. The Soviet economy needed up to 17,000 working hands immediately, and up to 10,000 were to be hosted within the next three months. Before he left Paris, he had already instructed Yerevan to send two representatives to Greece.

The article mentioned the enthusiasm generated by Ter-Gabrielyan’s visit abroad. The editors then named several places from which welcoming telegrams had been received. Marseille, Athens, and London were among them, as was *Syria*.<sup>337</sup> While the other locations were cities, Syria represented a whole country. Tellingly, it was the only name highlighted in the text. Evidently, in all the declarations, the names of two countries, Greece and Syria, were mentioned side by side. The active negotiations of the AGBU with the French authorities and the LoN and the plans to construct new Armenian villages in Northern Syria undoubtedly worried the Soviet authorities, serving yet another proof of the secret Armenian “home.” The Soviet authorities considered such an Armenian gathering on the Syrian-Turkish border an organized imperialist conspiracy against the Soviet regime and its only ally – Turkey.<sup>338</sup>

Despite the efforts of the AGBU and its chairman Gulbenkian to support the newly launched repatriation initiative, Armenian leaders still suspected hidden plots and sought to destroy the “Armenian home” in Syria.

One of the first actions of the AGBU leaders was to inform Max Huber, the president of the ILO, about the new repatriation decision. Pashalian highlighted the wish of the Soviet authorities to be able “to choose the refugees on the spot, giving preference to the neediest.”<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup>“Enker Sahak Ter-Gabrielyane Artasahmanum” [Commrad Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan Abroad], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, September 26, 1931, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>336</sup> In the original “Yurakanchyur ashkhatavor petk e haskana, vor khorhedayin Hayastane linelov ir hayrenike, Khorhrdayin Hayastani tshnamin el ir tshnamin e.” Ibid. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Kemalist Turkey was considered Moscow’s only ally until 1933 when the USA officially recognized the USSR.

<sup>339</sup> Nubar library, Fond Arménie Soviétique, 1922-1937, Pashalian à Max Huber, 11 Septembre 1931.

The point about the “neediest” refugees is interesting in itself. Why were the “neediest” favored? Was it done to claim the same refugees who had already “qualified” for urgent removal from Greece and were the primary targets of the AGBU? Although the point is not mentioned in the documents, we believe this is the case.

The extraordinary meeting of the Nansen International Office for Refugees (NIOR) convened on September 24–25, 1931, was thus, dedicated to the transfer of the Armenian refugees from Greece to Soviet Armenia. Because the vast majority of these 6,000 refugees (4,500) were to be settled on the territories (Kir and Sardarapat) that were part of the initial Nansen scheme, it was regarded as a partial success of Nansen’s project.<sup>340</sup> It was, thus, decided not to spare any possible financial or moral support for this transfer.<sup>341</sup> In all cases, NIOR, which referred to these refugees as “our refugees” decided to make sure that all the departing refugees signed certificates confirming their voluntary departure, freeing the Office from any further responsibility regardless of the success or the failure of the initiative.<sup>342</sup>

### **“Homeland” was calling**

On September 30, 1931, Gulbenkian addressed the Armenian diaspora regarding the repatriation, which he labeled a “historic event” in the face of the economic crises. Their settlement, coupled with the settlement plans for 15,000 refugees in Beirut and Aleppo, was a radical step toward solving the refugee problem, saving a total of 25,000 refugees, which would require sacrifices.<sup>343</sup>

This important call, dated September 30, only appeared in *Miutyun*’s November-December issue. Meanwhile, *Miutyun*’s October issue had covered the “massive repatriation” and Ter-Gabrielyan’s reception in Paris on the front page.<sup>344</sup> The article appealed for financial support accompanied by the photo of Ararat.<sup>345</sup> Was the photo to reinforce the place of Soviet Armenia

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<sup>340</sup> Nansen passed away in 1930.

<sup>341</sup> Office International Nansen pour les refugies sous l’autorité de la Société des Nations, Rapport du comite de direction sur les travaux de ses Séances extraordinaire, des 24 -25 septembre 1931, 2.

<sup>342</sup> Nubar Library, Fond Arménie Soviétique, 1922-1937, Office International Nansen pour les refugies sous l’autorité de la Société des Nations, Rapport du comité de direction et de la commission des finances réunis sur les travaux de leur 7eme session (extraordinaire), 6 février 1932, 2.

<sup>343</sup> G. Gulbenkian, “Hayastani Nergaghte,” *Miutyun*, November-December, 1931, 164.

<sup>344</sup> “Hayastani “masayakan” Nergaghte ec Voroshmagnire: Karavorutyune Anmijapes Piti Enduni 10,000 Gahgtakan, Varchapet Sahak Ter-Gabrielyane Parizi Mej” [Armenia’s “massive” repatriation plans and decisions; the government shall immediately accept 10,000 refugees, prime minister Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan in Paris], *Miutyun*, October, 1931, 1.

<sup>345</sup> The usage of pictures of Ararat during the 1946-48 repatriation was widespread. It is documented by Laycock. Jo Laycock, “The Repatriation of Armenians to Soviet Armenia” in *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in The Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945-50*, ed., Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (New York:

as the homeland for all the Armenians? It is not clear. What was clear, however, was the fact that the AGBU did not consider Syrian and Soviet Armenian settlement projects concurrent or in conflict. By contrast, Soviet Armenian authorities were angered by not having received similar financial assistance from the AGBU. Moreover, the fact that AGBU did not hesitate to allocate large sums to Syria but hesitated to do so for the Soviet “homeland” reinforced the Soviet fears that the refugees were merely the cover, and the funds and settlement served another hidden purpose. This notwithstanding, *Khorherdayin Hayastan*’s lengthy article that appeared on the first page on September 26 and summarized Ter-Gabrielyan’s visit did not mention anything about AGBU.

A week later, on October 4, 1931, *Khorherdayin Hayastan* published another interview with Ter-Gabrielyan on its front page. This article made it obvious that the repatriation was specifically directed at weakening the ARF’s position in the Armenian colonies. While Ter-Gabrielyan attempted to present the whole repatriation endeavor as a *humanitarian and paternalistic gesture to save* the Armenian workers who suffered greatly because of the economic crises, at the same time, he did not hide the real goals. The news of the repatriation had exploded as a bombshell on the heads of the Dashnaks (ARF) who for years run provocations against the Soviet authorities by accusing them of not organizing a mass repatriation. With the repatriation call, Dashnaks had lost their heads by starting a vigorous press campaign against it. Their press organs had started reporting “famine,” “starvation,” “obligatory slave labor”... because any massive repatriation would be a fatal danger because they would lose the elements they used to sell to the imperialists to fight against the USSR. It was a particularly important blow to the ARF-led *adventure* in *Syria*, where under cover of the *national home*, Dashnaks tried to provoke the bloodshed of the Armenian masses. Dashnaks try to turn the Armenian refugee workers into imperialist tools to fight against the Syrian workers’ national liberation movements and *the USSR*. Repatriation would help the Armenian refugees to see the true face of the Dashnaks.<sup>346</sup>

To make the repatriation a success, all that was needed from the Armenian refugees was to expose the ARF further. On the other hand, Armenian philanthropic organizations abroad (AGBU?) were expected to support it by all possible means.<sup>347</sup> This message made it clear that

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Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147; Jo Laycock’s, “Armenian Homelands and Homecomings, 1945-1949,” *Cultural and Social History*, 9:1 (2015), 103-123.

<sup>346</sup> “Nergakhti Kazmakerpman Shurj: Zruytc Enker Ter-Gabrielyani Het” [About the Organization of the Repatriation, Conversation with Comrad Ter-Gabrielyan], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, October 4, 1931, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

repatriation was far from being a purely humanitarian effort; *a simple national ingathering in the homeland*. Instead, it had important political and economic dimensions, fighting against political opponents and enemies and using the refugee workforce to develop the economy. Against this backdrop, when most countries were hit by economic crises, the economic progress in Soviet Armenia and the USSR, in general, which needed thousands of new working hands, was an important way of boosting the latter's prestige internationally. The pitiful refugee conditions in France, Syria, Greece, and Bulgaria, where the largest number of refugees lived, were highlighted.

The Soviet-ARF confrontation was nothing new, of course. What followed just days later proved that ARF was not the only "Soviet sworn enemy;" next to it figured the AGBU and its head Gulbenkian. On October 14, 1931, merely 10 days after the publication of Ter-Gabrielyan's interview, Aghassi Khanjyan, the first Secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia, made an astonishing speech titled "The main issues of our ideological struggle" before the heads of the cultural departments (*kulturtrop*).<sup>348</sup> While the aim of the meeting, as stated by Khanjyan, was the discussion of the educational issues in the secondary schools, the entire speech rested on the ideological issues, the achievements, and the enemies who hindered progress. He was explicit, "In the ideological front for the Armenian workers and beyond, the main enemy was and still remains ARF; ARF is the equivalent of the Armenian fascist party; ARF has been implementing and still does the orders of international imperialism; ARF is the most dangerous political party, which is ready to attack the USSR and Soviet Armenia, paid and armed by the imperialists."<sup>349</sup> Ter-Gabrielyan also stated that one of the most dangerous ARF endeavors was its attempt to create a "national united front" abroad, intended to establish ARF hegemony over the Armenian colonies while at the same time being directed at Soviet Armenia. Undoubtedly, it was part of the wider imperialist plan. However, the ARF did not act alone.

The concrete ARF steps to *create a national home in Syria achieved by Gulbenkian's direct support, who is close to the French and British imperialists, are against our plans to repatriate the Armenian refugees to Soviet Armenia*. Instead, it aims to create a "loyal force" for the French imperialists to exploit *Syria and suppress Syrian national liberation movements at the same time, providing cheap labor for Gulbenkian's oilfields*. The main aim for the creation of the "national home" is the preparation of cannon fodder for the anti-Soviet imperialist intervention.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> The speech that occupied the entire two pages of the newspapers were printed in all major papers of Soviet Armenia the following days. Aghasi Khanjyan, "Mer Ideologiakan Paykari Himnakan Khndimere" [The Main Issues in Our Ideological Struggle], *Avangard*, October 16, 17, 1931, 1-2.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*, October 16, 1. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

Khanjyan did not forget to mention all external and internal ARF-led adventures that threatened the USSR. Among them, he listed the Kurdish rebellion, Prométhée, the suspiciously warm relations with the fascist Romanian prime minister, Khatisyan's announcements of the need to push the "Armenian question" more actively (external), and the opposition of the Armenian peasants to forced collectivization (internal). These were all worrisome signs since the ultimate ARF goal was the organization of a military uprising against Soviet rule; thus, '*the underestimation of ARF's danger would have been a terrible mistake*'.<sup>351</sup> Khanjyan warned that, although attention was focused on the ARF threat, it was important not to neglect the other Armenian nationalist parties, such as the Henchaks and Ramkavars.

The news of the transfer of the Armenian refugees from Greece to Syria alarmed both the Soviet and Armenian authorities. This was yet another proof that new refugees were being offered an alleged "national home" while there was already a "homeland" for them. All possible means were to be employed to prevent the transfer of a single refugee from Greece to Syria. The aggressive Turkish and Syrian press polemic against the "Armenian refugees" of Syria was aimed at keeping the ARF away. The Soviet Armenian authorities were explicit, "There is a need to stop the immigration of Armenians to Syria" (*Patk e kasecnel hayeru gaghte depi Suria*). Instead, there would be an appeal to Moscow to repatriate them to the Northern Caucasus.<sup>352</sup> That Syria and Armenia were competing for settlement projects was also evident from the AGBU representative Karageozian's testimony. He recalled that Ter-Gabrielyan had promised his full support for the construction of Nubarashen, stressing the importance of increased financial assistance from the Armenian bourgeoisie to Soviet Armenia because "they (bourgeoisie) need to understand that their *homeland is Armenia and not Syria*."<sup>353</sup>

Indeed, the plan to transfer the Armenian refugees of Greece to Syria was dropped immediately. Only 27 refugees arrived in Syria "as a result of a misunderstanding."<sup>354</sup> The Soviet maneuver had worked since many refugees who had initially expressed interest in leaving for Syria hesitated and gave preference to Soviet Armenia instead.<sup>355</sup>

In a hasty manner, about 4,000 refugees were, indeed, transferred to Soviet Armenia from Greece. On the last day of December 1931, the first caravan comprising 1,923 refugees left for

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid, 2. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>352</sup> Ramkavar archive, Minutes of meetings 1931-1934, Meeting 88, February 2, 1932, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyun*, 84, fn. 86.

<sup>353</sup> Cited in Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 106. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>354</sup> "Batstrutyun Me Muityan Nakhagahin Hrajarakani Bun Patjarin Nkatmamb."

<sup>355</sup> Tigran Zaven, "Dashanktsutyun Khujape Nergaghti Voroshumitc Heto" [ARF's Panic after the Decision to Organize Repatriation], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, October 2, 1931, 2.

Armenia, and the second followed in February 1932 with 1,250 refugees. Three more small caravans were sent in 1932 and 1933.<sup>356</sup> The aim of the Soviet authorities was not only to hinder the transfer of Armenian refugees from Greece to Syria but much more. They intended to render the Jazira settlement plan impossible by exposing those settled there to such issues (unemployment, lack of funding, anti-Armenian polemic) that would not only make Jazira an unattractive settlement site but would also push those already there to leave.

### **The “sins” of Gulbenkian: Why Gulbenkian and why oilfields?**

Why was Gulbenkian regarded by the Soviet authorities as a guilty party in the creation of a rival “Armenian home in Syria?” Was it because of the ARF-Ramkavar rapprochement or Gulbenkian’s refusal to pledge funds for Soviet Armenia as well as Syria? Or something else? It turns out that all these points were relevant, but there was another factor as well. The French success in securing Syria as a transit for the Mosul-Tripoli pipeline and Gulbenkian’s role in this project was another determining factor.

For this research, discussions of the pipeline and the rail are interesting and important, not so much for revealing the complexity of the diplomatic negotiations but for understanding the connection with the refugee settlement in the Syrian Jazira.<sup>357</sup> Here, it may be helpful to remind readers exactly who was behind the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC). In March 1925, the Iraqi government granted an oil concession to the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), renamed IPC in 1929. Gulbenkian was the founder and principal architect of the TPC.<sup>358</sup>

In October 1927, oil was discovered in Iraq in large quantities. Since then, IPC, which was largely controlled by the British, had been involved in complicated negotiations with the Iraqi government regarding royalties, production, and distribution.<sup>359</sup> Wider imperial strategic interests were at stake. British interests dictated the construction of a pipeline transporting oil to the Mediterranean, with Haifa as the final stop. In addition, they sought to construct a new railway to link Baghdad with Palestine and Egypt. The British at first sought to have both the

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<sup>356</sup> Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 45.

<sup>357</sup> More on the rail project, see Jordi Tejel, *Rethinking State and Border Formation in the Middle East: Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands, 1921-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

<sup>358</sup> TPC was owned in equal amounts of 23.75 percent by four different groups; Anglo-Iranian Oil, Royal Dutch-Shell, Compagnie Française des Pétroles and Near East Development Corporation. The reason why these four companies held 23.75 instead of 25 percent, was the fact that a total of five percent was promised to Gulbenkian, considered “the best deal of the century.” More on this, see Johnathan Conlin, *Mr. Five Percent, the Many Lives of Galouste Gulbenkian, The World’s Richest Man* (Profile Books, London, 2019).

<sup>359</sup> More on the negotiations, Daniel Silverfarb, *Britian’s Informal Empire in the Middle East, 1919-1939* (Oxford University Press, 1986); Itamar Rabinovich, “Oil and Local Politics: French-Iraqi Negotiations in the Early 1930s” in *The Great Powers in the Middle East, 1919-1939*, ed., Uriel Dann (New York: Holmes and Meier 1988).



pipeline and the rail running through exclusively British-controlled territories, bypassing Syria and Lebanon. In such planning, the British interests overlapped with those of the Iraqis, who also sought to bypass Syria. At the end of June 1930, the Iraqi government confirmed that it would not propose any revision to the IPC's concessions.<sup>360</sup>

The French, by contrast, were interested in having the pipeline pass through Syria, which was the shortest way to the Mediterranean. If the pipeline was considered together with the railway, Alexandretta port was the best option, where parts of the Baghdad-Berlin railway existed.<sup>361</sup> Other transit options were Tripoli and Beirut. In all cases, this transit was to enhance the economic development of northern Syria.<sup>362</sup> It was not only the development of Syria and Lebanon that was central; France's own oil supply was also to be guaranteed too. This is why early on, French authorities in Paris began highlighting the importance of Syria as a major transportation hub. At the beginning of February 1928, merely four months after the discovery of oil in Mosul, *Journal de Debat* published an article where the plans to restore such a prominent role for Syria were emphasized. According to this article, cars, trucks, rails, and even airplanes were to replace the caravans that boomed in the Syrian desert. For the first time, plans were revealed for the construction of two new railways: Tripoli-Haifa, and Beirut-Damascus. The article also emphasized the importance of the emerging new Damascus-Baghdad route.<sup>363</sup> The former fame of the Euphrates valley was to be restored, connecting once again the Mediterranean with the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates had important irrigation potential allowing the construction of numerous new villages. It would give privileged access to the French to control the future transportation hubs.<sup>364</sup>

The prospects of an enhanced French position in the region greatly worried the Soviet authorities. *Khorherdayin Hayastan* reported on its front page the new dangers posed by the French imperialists and their reinforced position in the Middle East.<sup>365</sup> Since the danger was imminent, there was a need to reinforce the friendship with Turkey to confront such interventions with joint forces. Soviet authorities celebrated the ninth anniversary of the Turkish

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<sup>360</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 56.

<sup>361</sup> More on this railroad, see Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power, 1908-1918* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

<sup>362</sup> "Mosuli Karyughe ev Alexandrett" [Mosul's Oil and Alexandretta], *Yeprat*, January 25, 1928, 1.

<sup>363</sup> More on this route, see César Jaquier, "Motor Cars and Transdesert Traffic: Channelling Mobilities between Iraq and Syria, 1923-1930," in *Regimes of Mobility*, 228-255.

<sup>364</sup> René La Byuyère, "La ligne de l'Euphrate" [The Euphrates Line], *Journal des débats politique et littéraires*, February 9, 1928, 1, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k505411b/f1.image#> (accessed on June 5, 2021)

<sup>365</sup> "Fransiakan Imperializmii Interventionistakan Patrastutyunnere Merdzavor Arevkum" [The Preparations for the French Imperialist Intervention in the Middle East], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, June 27, 1931, 1.

Republic in Armenia in the autumn of 1931 to assure Turkey that any intervention against it under Kurdish or other cover would also meet opposition from the USSR.<sup>366</sup>

The British and the Iraqis rightly suspected that France wished to use her control of the Levant coast to develop her strategic position and assets in the whole region. Ponsot had been explicit about this to the British High Commissioner in Iraq by announcing that it was his ambition to link up Tripoli with Mosul and Northern Persia by the Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor route.<sup>367</sup> Thus, his suggestion to build a railway to connect Tripoli with Abu Kemal on the Syrian-Iraqi border would ultimately make the Baghdad-Haifa line uneconomic and largely redundant.

The French mandatory authorities, therefore, needed to use all possible means to make Syria a transit corridor. The High Commissioner's office was instructed by Quai d'Orsay to show all possible support to the ITP missions.<sup>368</sup> When, in January 1928, the papers in London reported the British willingness to carry the whole project under the British mandated territories, the French doubled their efforts by underlining the shortest, therefore, also the most economical route through Syria.<sup>369</sup> Lepissier, France's delegate in Baghdad was instructed to obtain the goodwill of the Iraqi government. In this context, talks about the possibility of installing Faysal in Syria were revived.<sup>370</sup> These efforts produced unexpected benefits, Faysal promised bifurcation at Haditha and a flow of 50% of Mosul's oil to the Tripoli terminal, provided that the French government gave him a "moral commitment to take into account in its policy in the Levant, the legitimate national aspirations common to Syria and Iraq."<sup>371</sup> No open commitment was ever made by the French regarding a promise of the Syrian throne to Faysal. This notwithstanding, on March 24, 1931, a new IPC convention was signed that respected Faysal's promise.

The French had obtained what they wished without making any major promises. To achieve this, they employed the technique they had mastered the best, manipulating the press. Articles were published in the Syrian, Egyptian, Italian, and British press, announcing that the French had signed an agreement with Ali (Faysal's brother) to enthrone him as the King of

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<sup>366</sup> "KSHM ec Turkiayi Barekamutyune Merdzavor Arevelki Khaghakhutyunn Amrapendogh Azdak" [The USSR-Turkey Friendship to Guarantee the Peace in the Middle East], *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, October 30, 1931, 1.

<sup>367</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 56, fn. 45, also in Rabinovitch, "Oil and Local Politics," 174.

<sup>368</sup> MAE, vol. 314, *Diplomatie à Haut-Commissaire Français Beyrouth* N: 608, "Envoi par le Turkish Petroleum une mission en Syrie," Paris, 17 décembre 1927.

<sup>369</sup> MAE, vol. 314, de Saint-Quentin, ministre plénipotentiaire sous -directeur d'Afrique au ministère des affaires étrangères, Paris, 20 janvier 1928.

<sup>370</sup> Previously, such discussions had taken place in November 1925, when France wished to use the "Faysal card" to surpress the Syrian Revolt, it was also used in 1928 to weaken the Syrian National Bloc by creating pro-royalist and anti-royalist factions in their ranks, see in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 55.

<sup>371</sup> MAE, vol. 459, "The Hashemite Candidature for the Syrian Throne," April 10, 1934, cited in *ibid*, fn 50, 80.

Syria. When puzzled French diplomats asked for clarification from the Quai d'Orsay, they received the following detail for their "personal information." "It is essential not to make any categorical public denial to the assertions you refer to because it serves our interest to treat King Faysal indulgently."<sup>372</sup> In this, we have a striking similarity with the articles about the "Armenian home" in diverse French-controlled sources. Although we were unable to find the equivalent of Quai d'Orsay's reply in relation to the "Armenian home," it gives us grounds to think that this (press campaign and avoidance of public denial) was a common French strategy and applied in political situations in the Middle East other than the "Armenian home."

In fact, French efforts to make Tripoli the port for the pipeline were strongly supported not only by Faysal but also by another unlikely player – Galust Gulbenkian. Previously, Gulbenkian had played a crucial role in the LoN's International Enquiry Commission that had decided the fate of Mosul, leaving it to British-mandated Iraq instead of Turkey. Back then, Gulbenkian was convinced that British-mandated Iraq was more likely than the Turkish authorities to confirm his company's rights to Mosul oil. It had been, therefore, crucial that Mosul's oilfields should end up on the Iraqi side of any Iraqi-Turkish border.<sup>373</sup> In June 1925, Gulbenkian had proposed to the LoN's Commission that he would "help with drawing the commission's map" by recruiting Zatik Khanzadian, the most famous Ottoman cartographer of the time, who "knew all the crooks and corners of the place."<sup>374</sup> Since no one in the Commission was familiar with the region, it was up to Khanzadian to make up the map according to "certain instructions regarding topographical positions... given that the whole thing is kept secret."<sup>375</sup> The British government was also involved through the British Petroleum Company.<sup>376</sup>

This time, Gulbenkian played a decisive role in determining the pipeline route. In October 1930, the AGBU in Paris gave the following good news to its Cairo office: thanks to Gulbenkian's personal submission before the IPC's board of directors, the final decision had been taken in favor of Tripoli. The construction of the Mosul-Tripoli-Haifa pipeline, which had a budget of 10 million sterling, was projected to start in 1931 and last five years. Moreover, an important agreement was also reached between Gulbenkian and the IPC board of directors; all the human resources for the pipeline construction (about 30,000 men) were to be recruited from

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<sup>372</sup> MAE, vol. 480, Berthelot to Chargé d'Affaires, Jeddah, 16 avril 1931, 89, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 58.

<sup>373</sup> Johnathan Conlin, *Mr. Five Percent*, 5.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Galouste Gulbenkian Foundation, archives, "Memorandum to be read to Mr. Nichols," June 20, 1925, LDN00866, cited in Conlin, *Mr. Five Percent*, 6.

<sup>376</sup> Peter Brek, "A Tedious and Perilous Controversary, Britain and the Settlement of the Mosul Dispute, 1918-1926," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 17:2 (1981), 256-276.

the Armenian refugees. This meant a stable and profitable job for the refugees that would save them from their current destitute condition.<sup>377</sup> All the AGBU branches in Syria were to be informed, and the refugees were to be discreetly listed.<sup>378</sup> This news undoubtedly created much joy and enthusiasm among the Armenian leaders in Cairo and considerably enhanced Gulbenkian's reputation as the newly elected president of the AGBU.

However, the AGBU Cairo members who knew the Syrian reality better drafted a response to Paris in which they mentioned the potential dangers. They reminded Paris about the recent strong anti-Armenian rhetoric in Syria. If the news reached the Syrian nationalists, then the next anti-Armenian polemic was unavoidable. Thus, AGBU Cairo advised against any exclusive recruitment among the Armenians; instead, the Syrians should be recruited in equal numbers. Such a plan would neither make the Armenians exclusive nor put them in the spotlight as privileged beneficiaries of an international project. Therefore, despite the AGBU instructions, no one in Syria should be informed to avoid creating unnecessary noise.<sup>379</sup>

It was not until April 1931 that AGBU Aleppo was discreetly informed and asked to prepare lists for potential Armenian workers to be submitted to the IPC's secretariat in London. Such requests were made in three separate letters, each containing reminders to act with extreme caution and without any advertisement.<sup>380</sup> The anxiety of the AGBU Cairo colleagues about caution was unfounded because the Armenian leaders in Aleppo understood the complexity of the situation well. The AGBU Aleppo director explained to Cairo that the request to prepare lists had been received in Aleppo with mixed feelings. The Syrian environment had recently been anti-Armenian and anti-mandate, and the situation remained fragile. The AGBU was, therefore, against any nominal lists, nor could the scheme be presented as an AGBU initiative. Instead, it was to be presented as an individual initiative that would not attract the suspicions of the local authorities. In any case, lists of suitable candidates were prepared and sent to Cairo.<sup>381</sup> The first list included 118 names, including workers, engineers, 14 names as rail specialists, and seven names as administrative workers. Moreover, Cairo was informed that, despite difficult economic conditions, there were almost no unemployed Armenian men in Aleppo, not because of the abundance of opportunities but simply because those who did not work would starve. The AGBU in Cairo was pleased to hear such news since the impression

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<sup>377</sup> *Apaga*, Paris, N. 19, January 17, 1931, *Miutyun*, N. 156, July, August 1932, 59.

<sup>378</sup> AGBU Central archives, Syrie-Liban 1921-1940, subdossier IPC, From the AGBU Paris to AGBU Cairo, Malezian, October 21, 1930, #13133

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid*, From the AGBU Cairo to AGBU Paris, November 6, 1930, #38396/193.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid*, From AGBU Aleppo to AGBU Cairo, June 8, 1931, #39818/396.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid*, From AGBU Cairo to AGBU Aleppo, Aleppo, June 20, 1931, #3997/233.

about the Armenians in Syria was that of starving refugees.<sup>382</sup> New names were gradually collected that included not only the Armenians of Aleppo but also Homs, Hama, and Beirut. Once the lists were prepared, a long wait was expected. Until mid-March 1932, there was still no news on whether the workers would be employed or not.<sup>383</sup>

Although AGBU Cairo was hopeful and assured its colleagues in Aleppo that firm promises had been given to them, the Aleppo refugees were not that optimistic.<sup>384</sup> In the meantime, the economic conditions had changed dramatically. All the public works were halted; in northern Syria, the harshest drought in years had devastated the region, leaving its inhabitants even without drinking water. In addition to the mass unemployment, prices had skyrocketed. Since most of the Armenians were daily laborers, there were no jobs for them, or the payment was so low that about 30% of the refugees had nothing to eat. Most of these people had waited for months to work on constructing the Mosul-Tripoli pipeline, but a great disappointment awaited them. When the work finally started, no Armenians were recruited; priority was given exclusively to the Syrians.

One of the main reasons for this situation was the series of scandalous accusations of the Soviet authorities against Gulbenkian and his resignation from his post as the director of AGBU in May 1932. As a result, no Armenian refugees in Syria were to be employed in the construction works. Why was Soviet Armenia, the self-proclaimed homeland, so keen to starve Armenian refugees of Syria? Was it to make them leave Syria or at least leave the borderland regions? It seemed to be so. After all, what other options were left for the starving Armenian refugees amid the severe economic crises and drought in the Syrian Jazira?

*Arev* soon reported that every single refugee in Syria had turned their gaze at Soviet Armenia because of the ongoing economic crises, the slow construction of the pipeline that had given them false hopes, the political uncertainty, and the threatening stand of the Syrian nationalists. The doors of the only Armenian homeland (*hay joghoverdi mayr hayrenik*) were open, said *Arev*.<sup>385</sup> It was much more important to send the refugees to Soviet Armenia to build New Diyarbekir, New Mush, New Kharberd, and other new towns than employ them on Mosul-Tripoli pipeline. If such thinking prevailed among the Armenian leaders and the charity organizations, they would have *built homes for the refugees in the homeland instead of sands or volcano*. In this case, there would be no reasons for exaggerated myths about an imaginary

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid, From AGBU Cairo to AGBU Aleppo, June 29, 1931, #39948/442.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid, From the AGBU Aleppo branch to AGBU central office in Cairo, Aleppo, March 118, 932, #6045/52.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid, AGBU Cairo to AGBU Aleppo, Cairo, March 24, 1932, #41959/232.

<sup>385</sup> Editorial, "Suria ev Hayastan [Syria and Armenia], *Arev*, October 12, 1932, 2.

“Armenian home.” The immigration of a few thousand Armenians to Soviet Armenia, on the other hand, would convince the Syrians that Armenian refugees had a homeland, they were not stateless, helpless, and without protection.<sup>386</sup> Another Ramkavar paper, *Paykar*, also agreed that the only salvation for the refugees of Aleppo lay in their transfer to Soviet Armenia. The Soviet authorities and the Repatriation Committee were to be appealed to immediately to make sure that all expected 4,000 people were taken from Syria.<sup>387</sup>

This clearly demonstrated that the Armenian refugees of Syria were not only caught between the state-building projects of the Syrian nationalists and the French mandatory authorities. They were equally caught between two homelands – Syria and Soviet Armenia and their competing state-building projects. Moreover, the alleged attempts to create a “national home” in Syria had outraged the “only legitimate homeland,” which ruthlessly made them unemployed, exposing them to the harshest conditions and leaving no other option but to quit the borderlands – the assumed location of that “national home.”

Gulbenkian presented his resignation on April 22, 1932, after waiting in vain for six months for apologies from the Soviet authorities.<sup>388</sup> By resigning, Gulbenkian wished to enable the AGBU to continue working with Soviet Armenia.<sup>389</sup> Soviet Armenian authorities not only did not deny the previous accusations but insisted that the Ramkavars were actively involved in the creation of the “Armenian home in Syria.” Meanwhile, the eighth Congress of the Armenian Communist Party in January 1932 declared that “the Soviet repatriation plan was a huge blow to the bloody adventure of the “Syrian national home.” (*Siriayi ‘azgayin ojakh’ aryunot avanturan khoshor harvats stacav nergaghti khordayin tsragrov*).<sup>390</sup>

On May 24, 1932, another article appeared in *Khorherdayin Hayastan*. This text not only repeated the accusations against Gulbenkian but expressed fury at having been bombarded by numerous requests to take back the accusations. Soviet authorities slammed back at “these people are ready to finance such a big amount of money for the refugee settlement in Syria but do not wish to finance similar settlements in Soviet Armenia, even though repatriation preparations are underway. This proves that Gulbenkian is interested in the settlement in Syria where he can exploit these refugees as an additional cheap workforce.”<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> These articles were translated and sent to the High Commissioner’s Press Office. See in CADN-SL 574, Prees.

<sup>387</sup> The correspondant of *Paykar* from Aleppo, “Angortsutyune Surio Hayutyan Mej” [The Unemployment among the Armenians in Syria] *Arev*, October 5, 1932, 1.

<sup>388</sup> Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 56.

<sup>389</sup> “H.B.E Miutyan Nakhagah G. Gulbenkian-I hrजारकाने” [The Resignation of G. Gulebnkian], *Miutyun*, July-August, N:156, 1932, 49-50.

<sup>390</sup> See the articles in the following issues of *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, January 17, 18, 20, 22, 1932.

<sup>391</sup> “Nergaght ev “Suriakan Ojakh Shurje” [About the Repatration and the Armenian Home in Syria] *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, May 24, 1932, 2.

AGBU's denial of the alleged "Armenian home" referred to Soviet Armenia – as the unconditional homeland. Syria, on the other hand, along with other host countries was a mere temporary settlement, and the support provided to the refugees outside Soviet Armenia was a humanitarian obligation.<sup>392</sup>

The result of the Ramkavar-Soviet confrontation was the departure of not only the Ramkavars but also the Henschaks from the HOK, a process that had begun in 1931.<sup>393</sup> As the confrontation grew, Malezian declared to the Soviet authorities in 1936 that the AGBU refused to be the "cashbox paying for the HOK endeavors."<sup>394</sup>

Crucially, AGBU was heavily criticized for not spending enough funds not only by the Soviet authorities and their rival, the ARF, but even the Ramkavars and the so-called neutrals.<sup>395</sup>

*Hayastani Kochnak* praised the AGBU for its achievements but also criticized it for spending more on the refugees in Syria, Greece, and Mesopotamia than on those in Soviet Armenia. The paper ironically gave the painful example of Nubarashen. The author called everyone to concentrate their efforts on Soviet Armenia, reminding them that one year and a half after the repatriation call, only 2,000 Armenians had been repatriated.<sup>396</sup>

In December 1931, Ramkavar leaders acknowledged the widespread criticism against the AGBU and the threatening character of the Turkish press vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees of Syria. They found that the Turkish press had become much more aggressive, especially after the open accusations of the Soviet Armenian leaders. Thus, to fight against the aggressive polemics of the Turkish and the Syrian press, Ramkavar leaders appealed directly to Soviet Armenia's representative Shahverdyan, who was responsible for the repatriation.<sup>397</sup> While this step was telling, the response was equally so. They were told that there was no need to pay too much attention to the actions of the Armenian communists or the accusations against the Ramkavars; it was all done to keep the ARF away.<sup>398</sup> This statement makes it obvious that the communist, Turkish, and Syrian polemics against the AGBU and the Armenians of Syria were at times coordinated from the same centers – Moscow and Yerevan.

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<sup>392</sup> "Batsatruyun me Miutyun Nakhagahin Hrajarkani Bun Patjarin Nkatmamb" [An Explanation about the Real Reason of Gulbenkian's Resignation], *Miutyun*, July -August 1932, N: 156, 58-59.

<sup>393</sup> Lilit Markaryan, "Hayastani Ognutyun Komitei Pokhharaberutyunnere Spyurkahay Kusaktsutyunneri Het" [HOKs Relations with the Armenian Political Parties] *Banber Hayaastani Arkhivneri*, N:1 (2010), 196-197.

<sup>394</sup> NAA, fond 178, list 1, file 580, 46, From Malezian to Shahverdian, May 15, 1936, cited in Melkoyan, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 53.

<sup>395</sup> For Ramkavars, see Editorial, "Baregortsakani Nakhagahe" [The AGBU's Head], (a, b), May 17, 18, 1932, 2.

<sup>396</sup> K.M. Mkhalian, "Das me Chhavatatsogh Bareraren" [A Lesson from the Doubtful Benefactor], *Kochnak*, April 23, 1932, 1.

<sup>397</sup> Ramkavar party archive, minutes of meetings 1931-1934, meeting 80, December 12, 1931, cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miutyun*, 83-84, fn. 85.

<sup>398</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miutyun*, 84, fn. 86.

## **Soviet repatriations: nation ingathering or a political tool?**

Whether the Soviet Armenian settlement project could be considered as yet another ordinary ingathering exercise is studied by Soviet historians in the context of other similar Soviet initiatives.<sup>399</sup> The accusation which triggered Gulbenkian's resignation, on the other hand, has been studied by Soviet historian Karlen Dallakyan from the Soviet perspective and Eduard Melkonian from the AGBU perspective. Both scholars have aimed to find the root cause behind this "unjust accusation."

According to Dallakyan, the Soviet Armenian authorities were obliged (Moscow?) and pressured to support Turkey's position (?). Hence, Khanjyan had used the first possible opportunity, which happened to be a rather low-profile meeting.<sup>400</sup> Dallakyan also mentions Khanjyan's previous article published right after *Zarya Vostoka*'s publication, which contained an identical message. In October, Khanjyan repeated the content and added Gulbenkian's name.<sup>401</sup>

Dallakyan, writing in post-Soviet Armenia, stated, "it was foolish to announce, believe, or make-believe that the settlement of a few thousand poor and starving Armenian refugees in Northern Syria, surrounded by many different ethnic groups, could serve as a military outpost against the USSR or Turkey."<sup>402</sup> By this statement, Dallakyan essentially dismissed the possibility that Armenian settlements in Jazira could be the "real" reason behind the accusation. Instead, it was evident that, for him, Soviet Armenia was the unconditional and the only legitimate homeland – the center, while the colonies abroad were the diaspora. The issues raised by Khanjyan, therefore, referred to homeland-diaspora relations, revealing the tensions between them and also the relations between the other forces existing in the diaspora.<sup>403</sup>

This notwithstanding, Dallakyan started looking for the "real" reasons elsewhere. One of the factors he mentions is the continuous discontent of the Soviet Armenian leaders about insufficient spending by the AGBU in Soviet Armenia relative to elsewhere. Thus, in his book Dallakyan examines AGBU-Ramkavar relations, revealing considerable financial difficulties contrary to the stories told in Soviet Armenia.<sup>404</sup> Dallakyan also concluded that the "Armenian

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<sup>399</sup> Marine Martirosyan "Pastatghter Hay Gaghtakanneri Endunman u Teghavorman Khndimeri Veraberyal, 1925-1931" [Documents About the Issues while Hosting and Settling the Armenian Refugees, 1925-1931], *Banber Hayastani Arxivneri*, N:1 (2010), 103-121; Lilit Makaryan, "Hayastani Ognutyanyan."

<sup>400</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E. Miutyanyan*, 7, "Nergaghti ev "Suriakan Ojaksi" Shurj" [About the Repatriation and the "Syrian Home," *Khorherdayin Hayastan*, May 24, 1932, 2; Melkonyan, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 54-55.

<sup>401</sup> Raymond Kévorkian and Vahé Tachjian, *The Armenian General Benevolent Union: One Hundred Years of History, 1906-1940* (Cairo-Paris-New York, 2006), vol. 1:192-193; Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miutyanyan*, 8-9.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid*, 27, 31, 36.



national home” in Syria was entirely created by the Turkish propaganda machine, which successfully frightened the Soviet authorities. He grounded his argument by mentioning three facts: the desire of the Armenian refugees to be regrouped close to their original homeland (for the Cilicia Armenians, Syria was the best location), the desire of the Turkish authorities to not allow it, and USSR’ paranoia about the imminent “imperialist intervention.”<sup>405</sup> Thus, for Dallakyan, the creation of the Armenian “national home” in Syria was entirely imaginary and an example of successful Turkish propaganda aimed at their Soviet allies.<sup>406</sup> Dallakyan briefly discussed the articles in *L’Orient* and the Arab newspapers, which he believed were all paid for by Turkish agents. According to him, the Soviet authorities fought the creation of “the Armenian home in Syria” to please the Turkish authorities. That is why Khanjyan accused Gulbenkian, being sure that, without his financial contribution, the creation of such a “home” was impossible.<sup>407</sup>

Was it so? If we follow Dallakyan’s argument that all the blame should be attributed to Turkish propaganda aimed at preventing Armenian concentrations on the borderlands, we find that it has flaws. Dallakyan himself briefly stated that Turkey was equally against the concentration of Armenians in Soviet Armenia. This being the case, could the Soviet repatriation policy of bringing more refugees to Soviet Armenia please Turkey? While Turkey undoubtedly used all possible tools, including USSR paranoia, to fight against the ARF and the Armenians on the borders, this was just one factor. It is insufficient to explain the behavior of the Soviet Armenian authorities. In fact, something else also worried the Soviet Armenian authorities, and this was the possibility of having another “home” for the Ottoman refugees that could compete with Soviet Armenia, not only steering away important financial contributions but also threatening Soviet Armenia’s legitimacy as the “homeland.”

Soviet Armenian authorities skillfully used the overall geopolitical situation in which their interests overlapped incidentally with that of the USSR to fight against the threat of other “national homes.” Several facts have come to prove that the accusations against Gulbenkian had been an initiative by the Soviet Armenian authorities alone, which was not dictated by Moscow. Soviet high officials tried to no avail to convince the Armenian authorities to take back their accusations. On December 2, 1931, Barkov, the first USSR secretary in Paris, sent an urgent telegram to Ter-Gabrielyan. On January 5, 1932, merely a month later, the second “secret and urgent” telegram arrived. This time, it was from the USSR foreign affairs

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

<sup>406</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miutyan*, 57.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, 87.

commissar and was addressed to Ter-Gabrielyan, Khanjyan, and Orakhelashvili.<sup>408</sup> All these efforts failed. Khanjyan did not take his accusations back and, instead, another article with a satirical caricature appeared.<sup>409</sup> Finally, Dallakyan himself declared that the repatriation of 1931 pursued clear political goals and was the Soviet response to the “Armenian national home” of Syria.<sup>410</sup>



Figure 15. From *Banvor*, New York, June 25, 1932, 3.

<sup>408</sup> HAA, fond 4049, list 32, file 2, 2, 10; cited in Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miutyan*, 93-94, fn, 9, 10.

<sup>409</sup> “Burjuazian Tevavoats Miatcyal Jakat ke Kazmi Kh. Miutyan Dem: Gulbenkians Hrajarake ke Gortsatse Patervak Hardzakumi Khorherdayin Hayastani Vra” [The Bourgeoisie United in a United Front against the USSR: Gulbenkian’s Resignation is a Pretext for Attacking Soviet Armenia] *Banvor*, New York, June 25, 1932, 3.

<sup>410</sup> Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miutyan*, 83.

The reference to Gulbenkian was undoubtedly in relation to the construction plans for the Mosul-Tripoli-Haifa pipeline. The Soviet authorities would have known about Gulbenkian's plans to hire Armenian refugees because this news was published in *Apaga* and *Miutyun*.<sup>411</sup>

The episode of the “unjust, untimely and painful” accusation against Gulbenkian is studied in detail by Edmon Melkonian in the context of AGBU-Soviet Armenia relations as well as in the context of the internal power struggle in Soviet Armenia.<sup>412</sup> Melkonian recounts all the AGBU actions taken immediately before the Soviet authorities both in Moscow and Yerevan which had given no result. A few years later, all the Soviet Armenian authorities involved in the repatriation, along with AGBU's representative in Armenia, were accused of treachery and murdered at the hands of the Stalinist regime.<sup>413</sup> Melkonian addressed the question from a purely AGBU-Soviet authorities' relations angle, telling the story of this complicated relationship, while the wider geostrategic picture remained hidden.

Melkonian and Dallakyan concentrated on repatriation, the AGBU funds, and Turkish propaganda. Both authors mentioned scraps about a certain “national home in Syria,” which had been mentioned in the speeches of the leading Soviet authorities. Nevertheless, any potential connection was not made. Neither of the authors studied the matter in the broader context of imperial policies in the Middle East or even the refugee settlement schemes in Syria. To explain the whole story, it is necessary to situate the 1931–1932 repatriation and Gulbenkian's resignation in the wider context of the “Armenian national home in Syria” and the continuous legitimacy deficit of Soviet Armenia while presenting the many layers involved. This dissertation is such an attempt.

Apart from these two authors, there are the works of the communist era historians, who praised the repatriations uncritically. One of them is Meliksetyan, who studied all the Soviet repatriations. According to him, Moscow's financial support for the repatriation of 1932–33 was especially important.<sup>414</sup> The recent findings of Melkonian, however, based on recently declassified files, prove the opposite.<sup>415</sup> Another secret document sent to Molotov, the Chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars, revealed that the USSR had never

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<sup>411</sup> *Apaga*, Paris, N. 19, 17.01.1931, *Miutyun*, N. 156, July, August 1932, 59.

<sup>412</sup> Melkonian claims that Khanjyan did not want Ter-Gabrielyan to conclude a deal with Gulbenkian which could enhance his political weight. Thus, Gulbenkian's resignation was presented as the victory of the communist Khajyan over the capitalist Gulbenkian. Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 63-64.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>414</sup> HAA fond 113, list 3, files 1428, 1432, 1770, 1777 in H. Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk Arenchutyunnere ev Hayrenadardyutyune*, [Homeland-Diaspora Relations and Repatriations] (Yerevan, 1985), 115.

<sup>415</sup> 2,100,000 roubles, out of which 1,500,000 was paid directly to the state budget. HAA, fond 178, list 1, file 284, 7-12. Arsen Yessayan, Chairman of HOK to Comrade Amatouni, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Classified, Memorandum, January 1936, in Melkonian, *The Armenian General*, 79-80.

financed any of the Armenian repatriations.<sup>416</sup> Even Stalin had reportedly declared that “If the Armenian capitalists are stupid enough to help the Armenian communists build socialism, Armenian communists will be even more stupid to refuse such assistance.”<sup>417</sup>

From 1932–1936, a total of 8,007 refugees arrived in Soviet Armenia from three main destinations – Greece, Bulgaria, and France. Since the Soviet authorities attributed great importance to propaganda about the economic progress in the USSR, 100 hundred refugees were symbolically transferred from France.<sup>418</sup> This was an effective way to showcase the USSR as a preferred destination.

How should historians explain the hastily initiated repatriation, its slow progress, and its abrupt end? Was it because the USA officially recognized the USSR in 1933, and the imminent imperialist plot was over? Were the Soviet authorities pleased with the outcome? Did they resolve the core issue that the repatriation aimed to address? Soviet Armenia had neither the intention nor the means to repatriate thousands of refugees; instead, the whole repatriation endeavor was symbolic. Like all the previous repatriation projects, this was initiated and ended as suddenly as it had started to address a major political challenge. Back in 1925, 3,000 refugees were repatriated from Greece instead of the announced 10,000. An unsigned and undated document in the Armenian archives is quite telling in this regard. “The repatriation, now as previously, has a huge political importance.”<sup>419</sup>

Voluntary repatriation to the Soviet Union always had a clear political and ideological purpose and significance, aiming to position the USSR as a desired destination and raise its reputation as a refugee-hosting country. Melkonian documented how Armenia had never been prepared for any of the repatriations (1925, 1927, 1931, and well beyond) and could not undertake them without external support.<sup>420</sup> This also meant that repatriation had always been there to address broader Soviet political questions. In this sense, as rightly noted by Melkonian, “the political goals of the Soviet Union in the issue of repatriation unintentionally coincided with the ultimate interests of the Armenian people.”<sup>421</sup>

If Moscow used the “Armenian card,”<sup>422</sup> initiating repatriations to achieve its broad geostrategic goals, the Soviet Armenian authorities, in their turn, used the “repatriation card”

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<sup>416</sup> HAA, fond 113, List 3, file 1672, 13, cited in *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>417</sup> NAA, fond 1191, list 4, file 174, 84. Cited in *ibid*, 90.

<sup>418</sup> “Inchpes Meknetsan Nergaghtoghnerere Franciayen” [How Those Immigrating from France Left], *Arev*, December 30, 1932, 1.

<sup>419</sup> HHA, fond 1, list 7, file 84, the year 1927, 7-13 “Nor Hayrenadardutyunt Hunastanitic” [New Repatriation from Greece,] unsigned and undated.

<sup>420</sup> Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 60

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>422</sup> I borrow this term from Jordi Tejel, who uses the “Kurdish card” combination, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's*, 19.

to claim the Armenian refugees and reinforce the legitimacy of Soviet Armenia. Soviet authorities now effectively claimed to represent the Ottoman Armenians, too, while the so-called “repatriations” aimed to position Soviet Armenia as the only legitimate homeland. The Soviet authorities had initially refused to represent the Ottoman Armenians because of fears that by doing so, they would strengthen the ARF’s role in Soviet Armenia and the Caucasus<sup>423</sup> and because Moscow insisted that they had to be on friendly terms with Turkey.<sup>424</sup> Thus, the attitude of the Soviet authorities vis-à-vis the Ottoman Armenians has been regarded from the point of view of the struggle with the ARF since its inception. Now a diametrically opposite policy was adopted by the Soviet authorities. They would claim the refugees in order to minimize the ARF’s influence over them and to strengthen the Soviet authority and sovereignty. The AGBU, on the other hand, had considerable financial means and was involved in various settlement schemes and so exercised influence over the refugees. One way to discredit both ARF and AGBU was to claim that neither of them had served the refugees in any meaningful way. Moreover, it would be declared that both organizations were selfish, arrogant, and cared only for their own interests. By contrast, there was Soviet Armenia which truly cared for its refugees and orphans and wished to reconstruct the country to “repatriate” them.

Thus, repatriations proved to be powerful tools in fighting against other “national homes,” namely the one in Syria, which effectively competed with the only real and legitimate “homeland” – Soviet Armenia. In this, the interests of Moscow and Yerevan overlapped. The Armenian refugee settlement in the Syrian Jazira had taken on dangerous proportions in the eyes of both Moscow and Yerevan. For the former, it was the concern of having a new Armenian-Kurdish buffer zone against the USSR; for the latter, it was the fear of having a competing “Armenian homeland” for the Ottoman refugees. There is no doubt that the repatriation decision was taken in Moscow but suited the interests of both Moscow and Yerevan. For the latter, in addition to making the “Armenian home” in Jazira futile, it was also to fight against its age-old ideological opponent – the ARF, as well as more recent “enemies,” and enhance its grip over the Armenian communities abroad.

The 1931 repatriation (like all the others) stopped as suddenly as it had started. The appeals from the AGBU throughout 1934 and 1935 met no response. The only reply given by the Armenian authorities was that they needed to find a way to raise the issue with the central

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<sup>423</sup> Artak Darbinyan, *Hay Azatagrakan Sharjman Oreren (Husher, 1890-1940)* [Memories from the National Liberation Days, 1890-1940] (Yerevan, 2003), 309-318.

<sup>424</sup> Dallakyan, *Aknarnkner Spyurkahay Hasarakakan Metki Patmutyan* [About the History of the Diaspora Armenian Public Thought] (Yerevan, 1984), 10.

authorities in Moscow.<sup>425</sup> The fact that Moscow decided everything and Yerevan had little room for maneuver was obvious from the HOK president Yessayan's suggestion to all foreign representatives in Armenia as well as HOK delegates to appeal directly to Stalin.<sup>426</sup>

Logically, the neediest should be repatriated first, but even this had apparent advantages for the Soviet authorities, for the poorest would be accustomed to harsh conditions, and yet, the situation would seem better than their previous status in foreign lands. These people were also the most hardworking and determined to succeed. Life, however, was not easy for those who arrived. Several managed to send letters testifying that many refugees did not manage to adapt to the new environment, had moved from one place to another and even tried to escape. A few refugees did escape, ironically, to Syria.<sup>427</sup> The Soviet calculations that the new settlers, who had been exposed to great hardships in their host countries, would appreciate the friendly attitude of the Soviet authorities, and feel at home, were wrong. Soon the authorities were taken by surprise that most of the settlers found it difficult to comply with the numerous limitations of Soviet rule. Such moods were unsettling for the local populations, too; this factor, coupled with the local authorities' inability to meet even the minimum needs of the incomers, suggested the solution to the problem – to halt the influx altogether.<sup>428</sup>

The year 1937 saw the start of the Stalinist purges. Both AGBU and HOK were identified as “anti-revolutionary” and dissolved. All the HOK members were either arrested or executed with the same accusations. In addition, all the officials that dealt with the diaspora were declared enemies of the people. Any contact with the outside world was forbidden regardless of its form and nature. Soviet Armenia abruptly cut all its ties with all the Armenian colonies abroad.

Under these conditions, the attention of the Armenian philanthropic organizations was concentrated elsewhere, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, where the French continued their favorable refugee settlement policies. The next chapter tells the story of the rise of the “Armenian” Jazira due to the indifference of the “homeland.”

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<sup>425</sup> A small number of repatriates of about 1,800 persons were received from France in 1936 after vigorous negotiations with the French authorities, the Nansen office and the AGBU. Melkonian, *The Armenian General*, 46, 49.

<sup>426</sup> HAA, 1191/4/174/ 37; cited in *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>427</sup> Archives of Nubar AGBU, Réalisation de l'UGAB au Proche Orient, années 1920s, Burnier to Pashalian, in Zekuytc, H.B.E. Miutyán, “Merdzavor Arevelki Chqavor Gaghtakanu Ognutyune” [AGBU Report, Support to the impoverished Armenian Refugees of the Middle East], 1934 (18).

<sup>428</sup> Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 47.

## The rise of the “Armenian” Jazira

By 1930, the French mandatory authorities had realized the benefits of working with the LoN while accomplishing their refugee resettlement schemes in Syria. When Nansen died in May 1930, the future of the NIOR was in limbo, creating anxiety in Paris. Quai d’Orsay explained that it was important to keep the LoN’s “façade,” which gave an international character to their activities, secured additional funds, and kept the LoN responsible for the settlement in the eyes of the Syrians.<sup>429</sup> Within a short period, both urban and rural settlements had been achieved. The Jazira took another shape after 1932 due to renewed French and LoN efforts.

In Aleppo, the new Armenian neighborhoods of Meidan (Nor Gyugh), Ajurlugi, Sheikh Magsudi, Bostan pasha, Davudiye, and others were quickly built. The new modern settlements for the refugees stood proudly on the north-eastern hills of Aleppo, separated from the rest of the city by large space for security reasons. There, the Armenians were regrouped according to their regions of origin in modern houses enjoying rare commodities such as electricity, to which many locals did not have access, conditions were healthy, and the people could be controlled more easily.<sup>430</sup> The French proudly reported that: “Armenians now own their houses, are rightful citizens, attached to their new *homeland* and the mandatory – without whom they would have stayed *strangers*.”<sup>431</sup>

As of 1938, 12 new neighborhoods, with a total of 2,500 houses, had been constructed in Aleppo, and 64 houses and six villages had been built in the Alexandretta region. In addition, there was one neighborhood with 109 houses in Damascus and 17 neighborhoods in Beirut.<sup>432</sup> The historian Vahé Tachjian has written extensively about the creation of these neighborhoods.<sup>433</sup>

The rural Armenian settlements in the Syrian Jazira also prospered. Many of these villages had been abandoned during the drought but started to regain new inhabitants in the second half of the 1930s. The growth accelerated at the end of the 1930s when, due to the evacuation of Alexandretta, many new families arrived. Between 1936 and 1938, many Armenians were ironically employed in the construction of the Nusaybin - Tel Kochek line, the

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<sup>429</sup> CADN-SL 2387, Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire de la R.F., Secret, “Dissolution du commissariat aux réfugiés de Genève,” 28 mai 1930.

<sup>430</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le delegue-adjoint pour le vilayet d’Alep à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire. “Destruction du camp arméniens,” 18 janvier 1938.

<sup>431</sup> CADN-SL 575, Le delegué-adjoint pour le vilayet d’Alep à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire, 6 juillet 1940. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>432</sup> CADN-SL 576, De Martel à Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, “Bureau Nansen et les réfugiés arméniens,” Beyrouth, 12 novembre 1938.

<sup>433</sup> Tachjian, *The Armenian General*; Tachjian, “Des camps de réfugiés aux quartiers urbains.”

last station of the Berlin–Baghdad railway on the Syrian-Iraqi border.<sup>434</sup> As we know, many of them had worked previously on the construction of this railway in WWI during the Armenian genocide. We also know that just a few years ago, the construction of the Kirkuk–Tripoli pipeline was finalized without the employment of any Armenian due to the spoiling efforts of Soviet Armenia. At the end of the 1930s, the employment of Armenian refugees on the railway went unhindered since Soviet Armenia did not interfere. This, in turn, helped the Armenian settlements to prosper in Syria.

Syrian Armenians, however, saw the success of the Armenians in Syria differently. *Geghard* explained that the reason for recruiting a large number of Armenians had been the “Armenian qualities” of hard work, patience, reliability, and professionalism as well as linguistic skills.<sup>435</sup> The French mandatory authorities only agreed. One such report explained that the Armenian refugee presence had forced the French authorities to solve a few delicate issues in Syria, including controlling and containing the spread of epidemics and finding shelter and employment for the refugees. Moreover, all the outstanding issues had been solved with the help of the Armenians themselves, who had been hardworking and cooperative, contributing to the economic development of Syria.<sup>436</sup> The same report also acknowledged that the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine had created doubts among the Syrians that the Armenian refugees aimed to achieve the same goal in Syria. These doubts had been reinforced given the Armenian tendency to preserve their language and traditions, creating a strong, non-assimilatory community. French interests, however, required this community to be assimilated with the natives. “If there are Armenians in the Levant today, there is no Armenian question here.” Armenian refugees had served as an important basis for the valuable collaboration between the French and the Nansen Refugee Office as well as an excellent example of the French brokered peace in Alexandretta.<sup>437</sup> The given example of Alexandretta was ironic because a few years after this proud declaration, it was ceded to Turkey and the Armenians, both resettled and native, had to emigrate yet again.

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<sup>434</sup> Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power, 1898-1918* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

<sup>435</sup> S. Nazarian, “Suriakan Erkatughagitse ev Hayots Npaste Anor Verelkin” [The Syrian Railway and the Armenian Input for its Development] *Geghard* (1985), 394-404.

<sup>436</sup> CADN-SL 574, de Martel, Haut Commissaire à le délégué adjoint d'après du gouvernement du Djebel Druze, “Note sur les questions arméniennes dans les États sous mandate français,” Beyrouth, 26 novembre 1935.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*



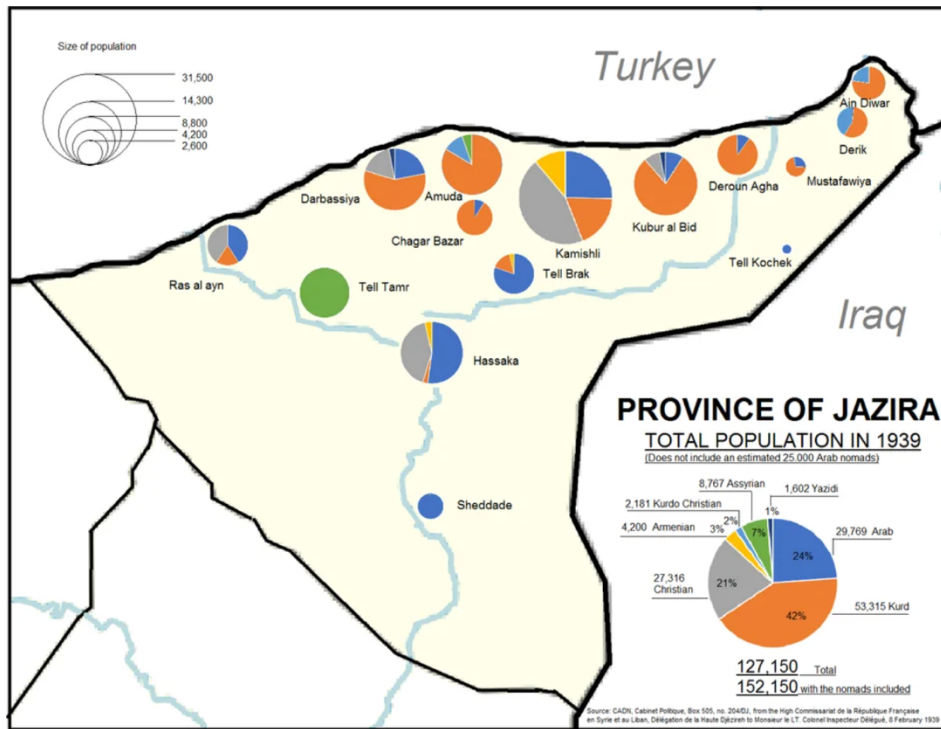


Figure 16. Ethnic map of Syrian Jazira, 1939. CADN-SL 505, N:204. Source Redid.com

By the end of the 1930s, Jazira was home to about 40,000 Armenians, who established between 25 and 30 villages.<sup>438</sup> The transformation of the Syrian Jazira was also acknowledged by Muhamed Kurd Ali, a famous editor and statesman, who visited the region in the autumn of 1931:

I was pleased with what I saw in Jazira; many important works have been achieved in some parts of it. Not long ago, there was nothing in this remote place, whereas now there are bridges, roads, schools, state administration buildings... The most striking of all were Hassake and Qamishli. Merely six years ago, the former was a small village; today, it has 5,000 inhabitants, while the latter had just one house standing; today, it has about 12,000 inhabitants. Its inhabitants have electricity and beautiful gardens. Tomorrow, the same shall be the case in other locations...<sup>439</sup>

This remarkable achievement that had costed 653,100 Syrian-Lebanese livres sterling, was received from various sources. Considering the breakdown of the contributions, it becomes obvious that the entire endeavor was far from being a humanitarian project. Out of the total of 653,100 livres sterling, 150,000 came from the High Commissioner's budget, 150,000 from the French budget, 13,200 from the Syrian government, and 116,900 from different organizations,

<sup>438</sup> Ani Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki Patmutyune, 1946-1970* [The History of the Armenian Community in Syria, 1946-1970] (Yerevan, 2018), 153.

<sup>439</sup> Muhammed Kurd Ali, *Muzakarat* [Memories], (Riyadh, adwā al-salaf, 2010) 2:436-440, "To the Excellency, the President of Syria," November 18, 1931, Damascus.

including the AGBU, whereas the refugees were reimbursed 223,000 between 1926 and 1938 – one-third of the total cost.<sup>440</sup>

Despite being represented as “humanitarian” to the general public, certain French authorities duly acknowledged that refugee opinions had to be considered to ensure success. The French chief military doctor in Syria and Lebanon, General Duguet’s announcement echoed this logic:

Refugee settlement is far from being a charity or a gift; *refugees must reimburse their settlement costs*; thus, all the settlement provisions must receive advance approbation by the refugees, and everything shall also be founded on *mutual trust*. It is wrong to present the refugees as faceless masses; on the contrary, they form an excited crowd that risks becoming unruly. Thus, with five years reimbursement plan, the scheme *must* succeed; there is no other alternative.<sup>441</sup>

Meanwhile, the French had also abandoned the idea of an “Armenian home” in the Syrian Jazira. The commander of the Levant troops in Syria concluded that the Armenian refugees would preserve their language, religion, political ideas, and memories of the lost homeland for a long time. However, the creation of an “Armenian home” in Syria would be a mistake, as it would become a reason for violent rivalry between the Armenians and the locals, whether Christian or Muslim. Therefore, the Armenians were to be progressively integrated.<sup>442</sup> By the end of the 1930s, just before their departure, the French authorities took the opportunity to facilitate the acquisition of citizenship for the newly arrived Armenian refugees and for those (about 10,000 in Aleppo) who remained undocumented. A speedy procedure was put in place in February 1940.<sup>443</sup> Notably, this act was not done without the consent of the local Syrian authorities. The French delegate reported that Syrian authorities were favorable but wished to avoid publicity.<sup>444</sup>

The Armenian refugee leaders, on their part, were perfectly aware that the French mandatory authorities used their presence in Syria and Lebanon to strengthen the local Arab Christians to achieve their own political goals. Shortly after the departure of the French and the proclamation of Syrian independence, one of the leading Armenians of Aleppo declared: “It is

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<sup>440</sup> CADN-SL 576, De Martel à Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, “Bureau Nansen et les réfugiés arméniens,” Beyrouth, 12 novembre 1938.

<sup>441</sup> AGBU Archives, File Etablissement en Syrie et au Liban, 1925-1929, AGBU-Nansen Office, Zekuyts, Pashalian, “Surio Hay Gaghtakannerun Teghavorman Gortse” [The Settlement of the Armenian Refugees in Syria], undated. (Highlighted in the original).

<sup>442</sup> CADN-SL 573, brochure, Commandant des troupes du Levant, 2<sup>nd</sup> bureau, “Question arménienne dans les pays sous mandat,” July 1932.

<sup>443</sup> CADN-SL 577, le Conseiller d’Ambassade Delegué du Haut Commissaire en Syrie à Monsieur G. Puaux, Ambassadeur Haut Commissaire, “Naturalisation Syrienne des arméniens d’Alep,” Beyrouth, 19 janvier 1940.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid, the naturalization was exercised not only for the Armenians but for everyone without nationality and who had lived in Syria for five consecutive years.

with great honor that we mention that despite many provocations, Armenians managed to keep their honest and responsible reputation before the Arabs. Although for many years, they had to work hard... to erase their 'refugee' label."<sup>445</sup>

"Our (Armenian) wishes are the same as those of the Syrians;" this was the message that Syrian-Armenian communists transmitted to the two French deputies upon their arrival in Beirut in March 1938.<sup>446</sup> How did Armenian refugees and their leaders manage to overcome the provocations, to prove their Syrian hosts that they were not siding with the French against the Syrian independence. The next chapter explains this transition from "guests" to "citizens."

### **From "guests" to citizens**

The 1930s, especially the second half, were eventful for the Syrians and Armenians alike. The Great Depression, the stagnant economy, the worsened economic conditions, and rising prices had all provoked widespread discontent, increasingly accompanied by large-scale demonstrations. In addition, the political situation in Syria remained tense. After the contested elections of 1931–1932, tanks appeared once again in the streets of Damascus, followed by violent clashes, while the Franco-Syrian treaty negotiations did not progress.<sup>447</sup>

The National Bloc had participated in these elections on the understanding that a Franco-Syrian treaty would be concluded. The French not only did not intend to sign any treaty, but they also strived to avoid the victory of the National Bloc. Thus, they had prepared a pro-French electoral list, while the heads of all the ethnic and religious minorities in Aleppo were asked to demand "minority protection" provisions.<sup>448</sup>

The situation of the Armenians of Aleppo was delicate, and their participation in the elections was important. At the end of 1931, the Armenian community of Aleppo consisted of 35,000 persons.<sup>449</sup> Once again, Armenian refugees were making headlines on the front pages of the Damascene nationalist papers; "Smart elements?! The owners of the 'real' interests in

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<sup>445</sup> S. Nazarian, "Suriakan Erkatughagitse ev Hayots Npaste."

<sup>446</sup> Madoyan, *Kyanke Me*, 220.

<sup>447</sup> For details about these elections see K. Watenpugh, "Middle-Class Modernity and the Persistence of the Politics of Notables in Inter-War Syria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.35:2 (2003), 257-286; Joel Veldkamp, "The Politics of Aleppo's."

<sup>448</sup> Amin Said, *al-Suwra al-arabiya al kubra* cited in Topuzyan *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 160.

<sup>449</sup> 18,500 male and 16,000 females respectively, see in Mer Sepakan Tghtaktcen, "Halepi Sherjani Hayutyune," from the Own Correspondent [The Armenians of Aleppo Region], *Hayrenik*, November 20, 1931, 1.

the country while the nationalists are extremists, bankrupt and reckless!”<sup>450</sup> “When does the weak play the game of the strong?”<sup>451</sup>

While *al-Qabas* tended to portray the entire Armenian refugee community as the “owners of the special interest” who demanded minority protection, French authorities arrested 20 Henschak members under the pretext that they were communists. What *Al-Qabas* did not know, the French knew well; not all Armenians supported the mandate, and communist and pro-Soviet forces would hinder the elections of the pro-mandate candidates. In the end, the pro-French list won. It included four Armenian names (Nicola Janji, Hrach Papazian, and Harry bey Hindiye from Aleppo, and Movses Ter-Galustian from Antioch). The victory of this list meant that on the Armenian side, the ARF candidates were successful,<sup>452</sup> while for the Syrians, the nationalists were excluded.<sup>453</sup>

The political and economic situations remained tense long after the conclusion of the elections in the whole of Syria but in Aleppo in particular. There, the bitterness permeating the political situation was matched by the deep dissatisfaction in the commercial and agricultural sectors. The situation was difficult in the Syrian Jazira, too, where after years of drought, the region had a late spring frost in 1932 that damaged most of the crops and vineyards, while as many as 1 million livestock perished.<sup>454</sup>

In this generally tense atmosphere, the Syrian Assembly opened on June 7, 1932, but was again shaken by internal political turmoil. Ponsot was replaced in autumn 1933 by Comte Damien de Martel. However, this change did not make signing the proposed treaty possible because the Syrians found that the text compromised the Syrian unity and sovereignty.<sup>455</sup> Moreover, article VII on the “minorities” was seen as contentious.

In the autumn of 1933, the Syrian Assembly was suspended, and another round of turmoil and demonstrations followed. In order to divert the attention of the Syrians from politics, the

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<sup>450</sup>“*Anāšir rashīda?! Wa āshāb mašāliḥ ‘ḥaqīqiyya’ fi al-balād... āmā al-waṭaniūn famuttarīfūna wa muflisūna wa ṭā’ishūna!*” [Clever Elements?! The Owner of the “real” Interests in the Country, While the Compatriots are Extremists, Bankrupt and Reckless!], *Al Qabas*, January 27, 1932, 1.

<sup>451</sup> “*Matay kāna al-ḍa’if yala’bu lu’aba al-qawīy?* [When Does the Weak Play the Game of the Strong?], *Al Qabas* Damascus, March 20, 1933, 1.

<sup>452</sup> The “nationalists” Armenian candidates were Fetullah Asion, Mihran Byuzandian, Vahan Semerjipashian

<sup>453</sup> Dr. Abdalrahman Kayyali, Ibrahim Hanano, Edmond Rabath, Nicolas bey Makarbeni, Sa’dallah al-Jabiri, Khalik al-Muddares, Abdul Kader Sermeni.

<sup>454</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 85, 106; More on the livestock and the drought, see Laura Stocker, “The Camel Dispute: Cross-Border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929-1934,” in *Regimes of Mobility*, 319-350.

<sup>455</sup> The declaration of Dr. Shishakli in the Syrian Assembly in November 1933, CADN-SL:472, “Chamber of Deputies,” 4<sup>th</sup> session, November 21, 1933, 11-13.

French mandatory authorities highlighted the efforts of the mandatory power to improve the economic situation in Syria, a tactic that had given excellent results previously.

Among the most significant works there was the enlargement of the port of Beirut, an extension of the Baghdad railway line to the Iraqi frontier, improvement of the Damascus-Baghdad road, construction of a dam in Homs, and improvements to the airports at Aleppo and Damascus.<sup>456</sup> While all of these works were important, they also improved the positions of the French monopolies, such as the electricity, tobacco, and tramway. The people's conditions did not improve overnight, and the news of the suspension of the Syrian Parliament in the autumn of 1934 further frustrated the Syrian nationalists. Everyone was affected and dissatisfied, which ensured the organization of large-scale demonstrations.<sup>457</sup>

These demonstrations opened a new field of activity for the Syrian communists, who also looked for common ground with the National Bloc. It was through an initiative of the Lebanese communists that an illegal anti-imperialist congress was arranged in 1934. One of the first strikes staged by the communists was the one of the publishers, a protest that many Armenians also joined. It lasted for 10 days, during which *L'Orient* publishing house was destroyed. A strike of the Aleppo textile workers, in which 17,000 people participated, followed. Next year, it was the boycott of Régie de Tabac. *An-Nida* had reported that many Armenian men publicly destroyed cigarettes and refused to smoke.<sup>458</sup> A boycott against the Damascus Tramway and Electricity Company followed in June 1935.<sup>459</sup> The boycott continued and off throughout the summer and autumn.<sup>460</sup> Syrian nationalists also sent numerous petitions to Quai d'Orsay requesting a French Parliamentary Committee of Enquiry to be sent to the Levant to witness the "disastrous French policies in Syria."<sup>461</sup>

All these strikes culminated in the longest strike, which started on 18 January 1936 and lasted 50 days. In this strike, women, led by late Ibrahim Hanano's daughter, and the youth were active.<sup>462</sup> The General Strike had already been going on for a week when the National Bloc joined. In fact, the strike was the result of widespread and popular discontent, and the National Bloc and the communists merely followed the events.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> *L'Orient*, July 6, 1934, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 156, fn 62.

<sup>457</sup> *Revolutionary Vostok*, 1935 cited in Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 168.

<sup>458</sup> *Al-Nida* March 5, 1935 cited in N.H. Hovhannisyán and H.S. Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyán Hamar Mghvats Paykarum* [Syria in the Struggle for Independence] (Yerevan, 1974), 170.

<sup>459</sup> Khury, *Syria under the French Mandate*, 453.

<sup>460</sup> MAE 491, Lagarde à Quai d'Orsay, aout 9, 1935, cited in *Ibid*, 453.

<sup>461</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 169.

<sup>462</sup> Ibrahim Hanano passed away in November 1935. "Kyanke Siriayum: Shukanere Gots, Bantarkealnere Hots: Hardzakumner, Krivner, ev Dzerbakalututyunner" [Life in Syria: The Bazars Closed, Many Arrested, Attacks, Fights and Arrests], *Yeprat*, January 24, 1936, 1, 4.

<sup>463</sup> Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 192, 194; also Khury, *Syria under French Mandate*.

An immediate result of this strike was the departure of the Syrian delegation to Paris in March to negotiate the treaty, which would be signed on September 9, 1936.<sup>464</sup> During this time, French authorities capitalized on minority rights and encouraged autonomist movements in different parts of Syria.<sup>465</sup> The strongest such movement was in Jazira. Both factors and the elections of 1936 constituted a major challenge for the Armenians, who were once again caught between the French and the Syrian competing projects.

It must be said that Armenian participation in these strikes was becoming more and more visible, dispelling the erroneous impression that the Armenians were sustaining French rule. Their participation was even more important in the light of the new restrictions imposed in November 1933, immediately after the arrival of de Martel. On December 28, 1933, de Martel summoned the Armenian leaders and forbade their participation in any demonstration. He declared that Armenians were not supposed to participate in politics in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>466</sup> According to Topuzyan, the French worked tirelessly to create inter-ethnic clashes between 1928 and 1936; however, thanks to the Armenian workers (meaning the communists), such an eventuality was avoided.<sup>467</sup> In reality, as we have seen, most of the demonstrations were organized by the frustrated National Bloc. Because the atmosphere in Europe and elsewhere was rapidly changing due to the rise of fascism in Europe, communist historiographies later largely claimed the organization of these demonstrations as their own, under the “fight against the imperialists.”<sup>468</sup> The communists claimed the same and even took credit for the success of the treaty negotiations in Paris, connecting it with the French elections that had put the socialist-communist coalition in power, who also signed the treaty. Moreover, Topuzyan mentioned how Khaled Bagdesh was sent to Paris to facilitate contacts between the French leftist deputies and the Arab delegation.<sup>469</sup>

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Syrian nationalist press was more concerned about the arrival of the Assyrian refugees in the autumn of 1933 than the Armenians. For the time being, the entire nationalist press was dominated by the same fears the Syrians had expressed earlier regarding the Armenians.<sup>470</sup> This time, most of the grievances were about providing the

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<sup>464</sup> CADN-SL 475, Martel to Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, 11 mars 1936, cited in Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 205, fn 84.

<sup>465</sup> For example, insisting on administrative and financial autonomy in the Jabal Druze and the Alawites.

<sup>466</sup> Hask, 1933, cited in Topuzian, *Hayeri Masnakutyune* 67.

<sup>467</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 67-68.

<sup>468</sup> *Revolutioary Vostok* 1936, N1 cited in Hovhannisyan and H.S. Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyan Hamar* 168.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>470</sup> On this settlement see Khury, *Syria under French Mandate*; Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire. Les acteurs européens et la scène proche-orientale pendant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Sorbonne, Paris, 2004).

Assyrian refugees with financial support when such support had not been extended to the impoverished and starving Syrian peasants.

However, the Armenians were not entirely absent from the Syrian nationalist press nor the French subsidized papers. The contentious article on the “minorities” in the treaty text also revolved around the Armenians. The French had insisted on these provisions, quoting the example of the Assyrians in Iraq who were massacred in 1933, just after the admission of Iraq to the LoN.<sup>471</sup> The Syrian argument was the opposite.

*L'Orient* had published an interview given by Faris al-Khury, who was part of the Syrian delegation in Paris, in which he had announced that there were no minorities in Syria. Absurdly, however, he had referred to the Armenians and the Assyrians by saying that Armenians were granted Syrian citizenship many years ago, while the Assyrians, who were relative newcomers, wished to follow their example.<sup>472</sup> Al-Khury's announcements were not appreciated in the Armenian circles. If there were no minorities in Syria, why did he refer to the Armenians? By doing so, did he not direct the Syrian anger and frustration to the Armenians again? Did he mention Armenians considering their “incoming status” (*yekvor tarr*)? If so, it was wrong, for the Armenians had received citizenship as former Ottoman subjects just like the Syrians and had four deputies in the Syrian parliament. Finally, Armenians did not ask for special rights for their community, for Armenians were part of the Syrian nation. The author reminded al-Khury that his own brother had told the vicar of Damascus that Armenians of Syria, being overwhelmingly Cilicians, were not strangers in Syria but were in their historical homeland.<sup>473</sup>

On June 10, 1936, Damascus's nationalist paper *Al-Ittihad*, published a lengthy article by the lawyer Dr. Omar al-Jabiri, who asked *Yeprat* to translate it so the Armenian community could read it. Al-Jabiri declared that the time was right for the Armenians to stop behaving as “guests” in Syria. They had been living there for 15 years and had become Syrians. There had been a time when the Syrians had not appreciated the arrival of the Armenians, but this was understandable. Syria was newly formed and still fighting for its independence. It was known that ethnic and religious differences hindered nation-building efforts. Thus, there was a need for a mutual agreement. Now Syria wished to achieve national unity, and it was not wise for the Armenians to insist on their status as “guests.” The Syrians were now convinced that the

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<sup>471</sup> The main French arguments to keep the article on the “minorities” were justified by the commitments made to the minorities, the assurances given to Vatican, the declarations made in Geneva and the attitude of the Mandates Commission vis-a-vis the “minority” issue, see in CADN-SL: 480, “Garanties des minorités,” July 1936.

<sup>472</sup> “Ayts me Suriakan Patvirakutyán” [A Visit to the Syrian Delegation], *L'Orient*, June 23, 1936, 1 cited in M. “Haytararityan me Artiv” [On the Occasion of an Announcement], *Yeprat*, July 2, 1936, 2.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*

Armenians had contributed greatly to the development of their country, did not have hidden agendas, and had become a respected element. However, the Armenians now had a national duty to fulfill.<sup>474</sup>

The publication of this article was significant for several reasons. It was published in a nationalist paper by a well-respected lawyer, who declared that he did not express just his own opinion, but that of most Syrians. The other important factor was his wish to have the article translated into Armenian. Finally, it was a call for the Armenians to be fully integrated into the Syrian society in which they lived for almost two decades. In response, *Yeprat* published a lengthy editorial praising al-Jabiri. *Yeprat*'s editors believed that the Armenian and Arab press could bridge the two peoples, who lived side by side yet apart. All the misunderstandings stemmed from the fact that they did not know each other. Armenians, of course, could never forget the warm hospitality they had received in Syria. Now that Syria was about to achieve its independence, the Armenians were only happy for they had sacrificed millions of lives for the same ideals and were happy to see independence approaching for their Arab brothers.<sup>475</sup>

These publications helped the Armenian community to reflect on their status in Syria and share their fears and ideas with their Syrian counterparts. A few days after the publication of this article, Damadian was hosted in Aleppo, where he gave an important lecture in *Yeprat*'s headquarters as a response to al-Jabiri. He announced that the most urgent issue for the Armenians was, indeed, to clarify their own status in Syria – were they *guests* or were they *locals*? Clearly, the Armenians themselves did not have a definite position on this issue. At times the same actors, as well as newspapers, claimed that Armenians were “guests” and, at times, “citizens.” Thus, the status fluctuated and was subject to circumstances and even moods.

Damadian warned that such a double status was intolerable since it was in permanent conflict – how could a citizen also be a guest and, therefore, a stranger? It was high time for the Armenians to decide on their status and negotiate their proper place in Syria. There was no doubt that Armenian refugees were Armenians, but could they claim to be the citizens of Armenia? On which international treaty or agreement could they claim such citizenship, which they had not received? If the matter was left entirely to the Armenians, all the refugees would have probably preferred to claim the status of a “guest.” Obviously, no one had consulted them; instead, international treaties had settled their status. Even in the absence of such treaties, Armenians ought to present themselves as citizens of the countries where they resided if they understood their own interests, which was often not the case. On the other hand, it was also

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<sup>474</sup>“Meter Omar Al-Jabiri Hodvatse” [The Article of Dr. Omar al-Jabiri], *Yeprat*, June 21, 1936, 3.

<sup>475</sup> Editorial, “Mer Aselike” [What We Have to Say], *Yeprat*, June 25, 1936, 1.



obvious that most of the Armenian refugees in foreign lands would have preferred to be transferred to Armenia to their “homeland” if they had the choice and the opportunity. This, too, was impossible and would take many years.

The communities abroad could help the “homeland” from a distance if they managed to stop playing “cheap nationalism” and end their meaningless internal rivalry. Instead, Armenians abroad should adopt the same strategy as they had done when no Armenian state existed. They ought to consider themselves citizens of the countries where they resided, entitled to rights and having duties.<sup>476</sup> Both duties and rights were well understood. The most important duties were to be exemplary citizens and develop brotherly relations with the locals. Armenians should consider Syria and Lebanon their *second homeland* while remaining *true Armenians* by speaking Armenian and keeping the Armenian culture and traditions alive. As such, Armenians would contribute to Syria’s development hand-in-hand with the Syrians, never giving the impression that they were *a nation within a nation and a state within a state* as they had done until now. Instead, certain Armenian circles were again looking for new “protectors,” why? Were the Armenians afraid of being compromised after the departure of the French? From whom did they expect protection – from the leaving French, from the LoN? Was it not better to have the sympathy and protection of the local government instead? Who did not understand that looking for external protectors would only worsen their relations with the locals? Armenians needed to draw lessons from their 50 years of national struggle and look around; the Kurdish rebellion, the recent Assyrian massacres, and the most recent anti-Zionist movements in Palestine (1936 riots) were all important lessons. What had the Armenians done against the local people, and what could the authorities fear now? Armenians had no territorial claims in Syria, nor had they demanded any special privileges, nor were the Armenians against the wishes of the Syrians to achieve their independence. There was only one outstanding issue between the Armenians and the locals – the economic competition, which also had a positive aspect – the development of handicrafts and the economy.

Unfortunately, the Armenians faced many internal threats, especially the communist danger and the violent inter-party struggle. These two threats not only hindered a peaceful community life but downgraded the reputations of politicized Armenians. The communist activity was deplorable, but at least Armenian communists never acted on behalf of the Armenians but rather on behalf of the “Syrian Lebanese Communist Party.” For Damadian, the only real danger remained the activities of the ARF because their actions and announcements were said to be on

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<sup>476</sup> “Tiar M. Damadian-i Banakhosutyune Yeprati Serahin Mej” [Damadian’s Speech at Yeprat’s Editing House], *Yeprat*, July 2, 1936, 1.

behalf of “all the Armenians of Syria.” Their articles were spread in the Arabic press, and their denunciations, ceremonies, and flag demonstrations kept the local Syrian press, government, and courts busy almost daily. If Armenians were a quiet and peaceful community internally and did not look for external “protectors,” they could be sure to have no issues with the Syrians.<sup>477</sup> Such was Damadian’s speech in Aleppo, which clearly advocated the integration of the Armenian community.

When, at the end of August 1936, the news of the conclusion of the Treaty arrived in Aleppo, *Yeprat* printed a lengthy editorial congratulating Syrians on this important achievement at a critical moment marked by economic crises and remilitarization in Europe. Now more than ever, there was a need to strengthen relations with the Syrians by clarifying the Armenian position. Armenians were to be wise.<sup>478</sup> The best way forward was to cultivate close relations with their neighbors and learn their language, traditions, and customs. When they first arrived, Armenians knew little about these aspects. Today, 15 years later, they had built their neighborhoods and national life on Syrian soil and received local citizenship, but they still did not know much about the Syrians. This was unacceptable, and the little that they knew was fed by myths and prejudices. Instead, the Armenian leaders had been preoccupied with internal issues and neglected the Syrian reality, producing this unfortunate situation. Not only did the Armenians not know their hosts, but they also had not even taken the time to introduce themselves to the Syrians. Fifteen years later, Armenians still could not speak Arabic. It was only through the local language that it was possible to get to know the Syrians and make them understand that Armenians did not wish to be involved in politics. The order of the day was to be in complete understanding with the Syrians (*mer dratsiin het hasht u hamerashkh, - ays e orvan hramayakan pahanje*).<sup>479</sup>

On September 10, 1936, the Armenians joined the Syrians in celebrating the conclusion of the Treaty and took part in the pilgrimage to the Hanano’s cemetery.<sup>480</sup> When National Bloc members visited the Armenian prelacy, they thanked the Armenians for their active participation in all the festivities, which demonstrated the community’s sincerity towards their Syrian compatriots.<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> “Tiar M. Damadian-i Banakhosutyune Yeprati Serahin Mej,” *Yeprat*, July 5, 1936, 2.

<sup>478</sup> Editorial, “Dratsied Het” [Together with your Neighbor], (a), *Yeprat*, August 26, 1936, 2.

<sup>479</sup> Editorial, “Dratsied Het” [Together With Your Neighbor], (b), *Yeprat*, August 28, 1936, 2.

<sup>480</sup> “Park ev Pativ Ankakh Surio: Haghtakan Shkert” [For the Independent Syria: Te Victorious March], *Yeprat*, September 13, 1936, 1.

<sup>481</sup> Nazar, “Inch Khendimer Unen ev Inch Petk e Enel Surio Hayaotc Hamar” [What Are the Issues and What Shall be Done for the Armenians in Syria], *Yeprat*, November 18, 1936, 2.

Nevertheless, certain Armenian and French circles tried to present the Armenians as those who would suffer badly after the departure of the French.<sup>482</sup> In addition, the disturbances in Palestine, where the first armed clashes were happening, alarmed the Armenians. The internal confrontation among the Armenians reached new peaks too. On July 4, 1936, a united national front was created in Aleppo by the Henschak-Ramkavar-communist tandem, which was an anti-ARF coalition of pro-Soviet-Armenia forces. Their first call was issued on July 19, 1936: “Armenians of Syria do not have any future in Syria.” The powerful demonstrations and treaty negotiations had opened a new perspective for the Armenians, too.<sup>483</sup> The coalition was short-lived and lasted until only June 1937.

In the autumn of 1936, the Armenians still faced two major challenges; the Jazira autonomist movement and the legislative elections. The autonomist movement of the Syrian Jazira was a serious threat because Jazira was now home to a substantial number of Armenian refugees. Autonomist movements and demonstrations were encouraged and staged actively by the French officials there. While the Armenian Orthodox community remained neutral, the Armenian Catholics showed great interest.<sup>484</sup> Artashes Poghikian, a close ally of Hanano, penned an article in Arabic and Armenian to clarify the Armenian position. He declared that certain foreign and Syrian press tried to show the Armenians of Jazira as allies with the foreigners that aimed to separate these territories from the Syrian state. He not only denied such claims but reconfirmed that the Armenians were genuinely happy about Syrian independence.<sup>485</sup>

The response of the National Bloc to the autonomist movements was the creation of a paramilitary force, the Steel Shirts (*al-Qumsan al-Hadidiyya*).<sup>486</sup> The first such units had appeared in the streets of Damascus in the aftermath of the General Strike and spread quickly all over Syria.<sup>487</sup> In Aleppo, a Christian paramilitary organization called White Badge was also formed, becoming involved in violent clashes in the autumn of 1936.<sup>488</sup> Overall, the Christian

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<sup>482</sup> CADN-SL 491, Information N : 854, Septembre 15, 1936.

<sup>483</sup> Topuzyan, *Hayeri Masnakutyune*, 54.

<sup>484</sup> Details on the autonomist movement in the Syrian Jazira see Jordi Tejel, “Les territoires de marge de la Syrie mandataire : le mouvement autonomiste de la Haute Jazîra, paradoxes et ambiguïtés d’une intégration « nationale » inachevée (1936-1939),” *REMMM*, No. 126 (2009b).

<sup>485</sup> A. Poghikian, “Armenian Feelings Toward the Syrian Hmeland”, *Yeprat, Al-Shabab*, November 8, 1936, 2.

<sup>486</sup> More on this specially in Aleppo see Joel Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s.”

<sup>487</sup> By July 1936 it had around 3,000 members in Damascus, and 1,200 in Aleppo. Shambrook, *French Imperialism*, 215; K. Watenpaugh, “Steel Shirts, White Badges, and the Last Qabaday: Fascism, Urban Violence and Civic Identity in Aleppo under French Rule,” in *France, Syrie et Liban (1918-1946). Les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire*, ed., Nadine Méouchy, (Damascus : IFEAD, 2002), 325-347.

<sup>488</sup> See the details, in “Inchpes Patahetsav Kirakii Depke” [How Did the Incident of Sunday Happen], *Yeprat*, October 14, 1936, 1.

leaders were careful not to appear anti-nationalist. It was clear that the day would soon come when the French would leave, and they would have to negotiate their status and place in the new Syria.

The formation of White Badge was harshly criticized by the editors of *Yeprat*.<sup>489</sup> All the Armenian leaders were categorically against any Armenians joining it. When its founders tried to open an office in Nor Gyugh, they were politely refused. However, when their fundraising campaigns were forbidden among the Armenians, the tensions reached a climax. On October 11, a violent clash took place between White Badge members and local Muslims in Aleppo in which no Armenians took part. However, as the clash became bigger, Muslims started to shout, “Armenians are killing the Muslims,” to mobilize more people. Crucially, instead of “Christians,” the word “Armenians” had been used. A major attack on the Armenian camp was prevented only by the efforts of Dr. Kayyali, Dr. Hasan Fuat, and Ustaz al-Sermeni.<sup>490</sup> However, the Armenians who were in the market during the clash had been targeted by both the Muslims and the Steel Shirts.<sup>491</sup>

This notwithstanding, *L’Orient* continued to report about a “large number of Armenians enlisting in the ranks of White Badge.”<sup>492</sup> The *Yeprat* editors cautioned Armenians that a hidden hand was once again turning the Syrians against the Armenians. Fifteen years later, the Armenians were *rightful Syrian citizens* and *not guests*, and they had to be careful *not to allow any new misunderstanding* between them and the Syrians. Armenians who had associated their economic and political interests with those of the Syrians... were to guide their independent *homeland* (Syria) to new victories.<sup>493</sup>

The next major challenge that Armenians faced in 1936 was the legislative elections held in November 1936.<sup>494</sup> A low turnout was predicted, and, thus, the National Bloc’s victory was inevitable.<sup>495</sup> This time, the most radical change took place in Aleppo. While in previous elections, their victory was hindered, now, it was assured. No “nationalist” candidates were imposed on the rural places or on the “minorities.” In Aleppo, the Armenian candidates were Fathallah Asiyyun, Bedrus Millatbashian (Ardashas Boghikian later replaced him), and Hrant

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<sup>489</sup> Editorial, “Jermak Nshane” [The White Badge], *Yeprat*, September 9, 1936, 2.

<sup>490</sup> “Inchpes Patahetsav Kirakii Depke,” *Yeprat*, October 14, 1936, 1.

<sup>491</sup> “Hayere ev Jermak Nshane” [Armenians and The White Badge], “Kristonya Petakan Peteru Haytararutyune” [The Declaration of the Christian Officers], “Mer Dimumnere” [Our Appeals], *Yeprat*, October 14, 1936, 1.

<sup>492</sup> Editorial, “Jermak Nshane ev Menk” [The White Badges and Us], *Yeprat*, September 11, 1936, 2.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.* (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>494</sup> Veldkamp, “The Politics of Aleppo’s,” Watenpaugh, “Steel Shirts.

<sup>495</sup> In the countryside, as usual, the turnout of the second-round voters was almost 100%, for example, in Jabal Samen out of 169 second-degree voters, 168 voted, in Jabal Al-Akrad all 91 voted, in Azez, out of 84, 80 voted, in Harem out of 72, 71 voted, in Bab out of 73, 71 voted, in Mumbaj out of 76, 72 voted, in Idlib out of 179, 167 voted, see “Entrutyants Ardyunke” [The Election Results], *Yeprat*, December 4, 1936, 2.

Sulahian.<sup>496</sup> The overwhelming victory of the National Bloc was praised in the pages of *Yeprat* as undeniable evidence of the popularity of the Bloc throughout Syria. The Armenians of Aleppo had also given their vote to the nationalists, whose patriotism, wisdom, and courage they trusted... to guide the Syrian people and the independent (Syrian) *homeland* to new victories.<sup>497</sup>

It is noteworthy how, in these articles and the overall discourse of the Armenian refugee leaders, “Syria” was increasingly referred to as the new “homeland.” Meanwhile, the term “second homeland,” which was employed previously, disappeared. Was this a clear acknowledgment that the Armenian refugees of Syria would remain in the country for a long time, if not permanently? Their “real homeland” had shown no interest in them, nor was it accessible. We shall see later how wrong they were in their calculations.

After the elections, from December 1936 onward, the whole of Syria was shaken by the crisis of the Alexandretta sanjak that lasted well into 1939, when it was ceded to Turkey by the French.<sup>498</sup> The Alexandretta crisis had an extraordinary uniting effect on the Armenian community. All the Armenian political circles had a common approach – to defend Alexandretta against the Turkish claims. Together with the Syrian nationalists, a great mobilization was underway to prepare for the plebiscite, which took place on June 2, 1937. Armenian communists and Henschaks participated actively in the demonstrations and strikes organized in Damascus along with the Arabic Committee of Defence of the Alexandretta Sanjak.<sup>499</sup> Seyffeddin al-Ma'mun, the head of the latter body, praised Armenians for standing by Syria on several occasions, “in the past some dark forces turned us against each other... those were the enemies of our people. Today, we are all the united sons of our Syrian homeland... and shall continue our struggle united.”<sup>500</sup> Armenian-Syrian united forces organized the transfer of Armenians, who were registered in Alexandretta but lived elsewhere,

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<sup>496</sup> For the biographies of Armenian and Syrian candidates, “Mer Yerespokhannere” [Our Deputies], *Yeprat*, December 2, 4, 1936, 2.

<sup>497</sup> Editorial, “Entrutyunneren yetk” [After the Elections], *Yeprat*, December 4, 1936, 2. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>498</sup> The issue of Alexandretta is well studied, for a diplomatic history of Turkey’s annexation of Alexandretta, see Sarah d. Schields, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), for the Syrian perspective, see Emma Lundgren Jörum, *Beyond Syria’s Border: A History of Territorial Disputes in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), for the Turkish perspective, see Yücel Güçlü, *The Question of the Sanjak of Alexandretta: A study in Turkish-French-Syrian Relations* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2001), for the Armenian perspective, see Alishan Bayramyan, *Aleksandreti Sanjaki Hartce Ev Mijazgayin Divanagitutyune, 1936-1939* (Yerevan, 1998).

<sup>499</sup> From the Armenian side, these demonstrations were led by Communist Hakob Berberian and Henschak Hakob Khashmanian, see in Hovhannes Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani Haykakan Gaghtojakhneri Patmutyun (1841-1946)* [History of Armenian Communities in Syria and Lebanon (1841-1946)] (Yerevan 1986), 236.

<sup>500</sup> *Joghoverdi Dzayn*, July 24, 1938 cited in *Ibid*, 255.

to participate in the referendum. Despite the results of the referendum, which was 60% against its cession to Turkey, the French authorities allowed the entrance of the Turkish armed forces. In July 1939, all the Armenians of Alexandretta left for Syria and Lebanon despite the efforts of the Turkish authorities to prevent the exodus.<sup>501</sup>

In 1939, the ARF, which usually ran on the pro-French electoral lists, reconciled with the National Bloc.<sup>502</sup> During World War II, the Syrian-Armenian cooperation was cemented even further. Once again, it was marked by the hyper-activity of the communist forces who, given the anti-Nazi struggle, had the room to act publicly.<sup>503</sup> Armenians were praised by leading communist leaders, including Khaled Bekdash and Farjalah Helleu, for their *loyalty* to their second homeland.<sup>504</sup> In the elections of 1943, in which the National Bloc won, the Armenians had four deputies, three from Aleppo and, for the first time, one from Damascus.<sup>505</sup>

On December 5, 1943, the vicar of Damascus, Yeprem Tohmuni, met with the newly elected president of Syria, Shukri Quwatli, to express the loyalty of the Armenian community to the Syrian state, which Armenians could prove by words and deeds.<sup>506</sup> Quwatli himself honored the Armenian community of Qamishli in November 1945.<sup>507</sup> Armenian community was also being praised by the Syrian communists as a significant national minority who had fought side by side with the Syrians to achieve independence.<sup>508</sup>

On July 19, 1944, Armenian leaders met in Aleppo in an extraordinary meeting to decide the official Armenian stance. It was decided that the Armenians should “be with the Syrians and not separate from them anymore.”<sup>509</sup> In May 1945, violent clashes between the Syrians and the French forces were widespread. Damascus was bombarded for two days (May 29–31) for the second time during the mandate period. During these troubles, on May 30, 1945, Tohmuni visited the Syrian minister of Internal Affairs, Takri Asali, to inform him that Armenians were

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<sup>501</sup> For the Turkish attempts to instil trust in the Armenians to remain, see CADN, 36PO/1/182, l’Ambassadeur de France, Haut-Commissaire de la république en Syrie et au Liban à son excellence Monsieur le ministre des affaires étrangères (Levant), “Situation des arméniens dans le Sanjak,” Beyrouth, 15 octobre 1938.

<sup>502</sup> CADN-SL 575, Sûreté Alep, N: 2486, “Elections dans le Sandjak d’Alexandrette,” Beyrouth, 9 mai 1938.

<sup>503</sup> Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 328; RGASPI, fond 4459, list 1, file 669, 8, cited in Hovhannisyan, Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun Hamar*, 235.

<sup>504</sup> Citations of their speeches, see in *Ibid*, 237-239.

<sup>505</sup> Sa’dallah al Jabiri formed the government, while Fares al-Khury was elected the speaker of the Assembly.

<sup>506</sup> *Joghoverdi Dzayn*, December 11, 1943, cited in Hovhannisyan, Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun Hamar*, 241.

<sup>507</sup> H. Cholakian, *Suriahay Deprotsi Patmutyun* [The History of the Armenian Schools in Syria] (Yerevan, 2021), 1:271.

<sup>508</sup> Khaled Bekdache, *La charte natioanle de la partie communiste en Syrie au Liban* (Beirut, 1944), 33, cited in Hovhannisyan, Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyun Hamar*, 258.

<sup>509</sup> The archives of the Armenian prelacy of Aleppo, Political Council’s meetings, vol. 59, “Erkamya Teghekagir Azgayin Varchutyun Kaghakan Joghovo Berio Temin,” 19 July 1944 – 30 September 1946, 25, cited in Cholakian, *Suriahay Dprotsi Patmutyun*, 2:208.

ready to take up weapons to fight alongside the Syrians.<sup>510</sup> During the same meeting, they also received assurances about the sincerity of Armenian loyalty. This bold Armenian step was also acknowledged by Albert Hourani, who announced that the Armenians had the courage to join with the Arab national forces despite opposition from the French.<sup>511</sup>

In May 1945, when violent clashes were happening between the French and the Syrian forces, many Armenians were mobilized to fight with the Syrians (against the French), especially in Aleppo. This, too, was highly appreciated and publicly praised by the Aleppo governor, Ihsan Sharaf, who met the Armenian leaders on May 21, 1945.<sup>512</sup> The Armenian leaders of Damascus, too, announced that the “Armenian people are Syrian citizens and conscious of their duties, are ready to act and sacrifice to the common cause along with the Syrians.”<sup>513</sup>

Armenians started actively enlisting as volunteers in the Syrian army. The Aleppo prelate issued a call asking all the Armenians serving in the French army to leave it immediately and join the Syrians.<sup>514</sup> Cholakian mentions that, although ARF opposed it, the organization chose to take a passive position in view of the delicate situation.<sup>515</sup> Archbishop Zareh, the prelate of Aleppo, used his own car to transfer Armenians still serving in the French army to the Syrian army.<sup>516</sup>

In the Syrian Jazira, too, the Armenian prelate representative, Khoren Baroyan, was the first to raise the Syrian flag over the former French military post.<sup>517</sup> The Armenian prelate sent delegates to Deir ez-Zor and Jarablus to facilitate the transfer of those Armenians still in the French service, either military or civil.<sup>518</sup> The minutes of the meetings kept in the archives of the Aleppo prelate testify that the Turkish press tried several times to exploit this transition, by creating violent clashes between the Syrians and the Armenians. This time, they failed.<sup>519</sup>

Soviet representatives, in their turn, reported to Yerevan that both the French and the British tried hard to organize violent clashes between the Syrians and the Armenians, preventing the smooth transfer of the Armenian military men from their military units to the Syrian state. For example, one such report mentioned how the British spread rumors about an imminent Syrian

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<sup>510</sup> Zartonk, May 31, 1946 cited in Hovhannisyán, Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyán Hamar*, 282.

<sup>511</sup> A. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 84.

<sup>512</sup> Zartonk, May 26, 1945, cited in Hovhannisyán, Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyán Hamar*, 278.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>514</sup> *Al-Nasr*, June 29, 1945, cited in Hovhannisyán, Sargsyan, *Sirian Ankakhutyán Hamar*, 283.

<sup>515</sup> Cholakian, *Suriahay Deprotci Patmutyun*, 207.

<sup>516</sup> Grigor Eblighetian, *Husher ev V kayatyunner* [Memories and Testimonies] (Aleppo, 2011), 40.

<sup>517</sup> Ani Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki Patmutyune*, 85.

<sup>518</sup> Cholakian, *Suriahay Dprotci Patmutyun*, 1:209.

<sup>519</sup> The archives of the Armenian prelate of Aleppo, Political Council's meetings, vol. 59.

attack on the Armenians, simultaneously spreading rumors among the Syrians that the Armenians were plotting against them.<sup>520</sup> Finally, the independence of Syria was proclaimed on April 17, 1946. The rest of the story is known, under British pressure, the French had little choice but to grant independence to Syria. By that time, however, the Armenian community had proved its loyalty to the Syrian hosts and were on friendly terms with the Syrians in a way never seen before. Armenians had ceased to be “guests” and acted and behaved as “citizens” ready to sacrifice themselves for their *second homeland*.

By 1946, the last refugee shanty house was destroyed in Aleppo. Armenians lived in the urban neighborhoods and rural colonies; they owned their houses and farms and were actively involved in the cultural affairs of their communities. By 1946, 124 Armenian schools operated in 80 different locations.<sup>521</sup> Thus, by the end of the 1940s, Armenian refugees were no more associated with the unwanted French mandate, nor were they considered a threat to the construction of the Syrian national state. Finally, these refugees had been integrated into the Syrian national state both economically and politically. However, just when the community had a prime opportunity to flourish in their *second homeland*, it would be uprooted once again, on an entirely voluntary basis.

## Conclusions

Part IV was devoted to the third wave of the major anti-Armenian polemic in Syria, the alleged Armenian-French conspiracy to establish an Armenian “national home” on the Syrian-Turkish borderlands. It aimed to reveal the many layers of that “Armenian home” by tracing its origins and the way in which it became the main source of the anti-Armenian discourse. As such, it aimed to reveal whether the criticisms expressed by the Syrian nationalists were imaginary or real. It showed that two unlikely sources – the French mandatory and Soviet Armenian officials – were behind the circulation of anti-Armenian propaganda in the Syrian nationalist press. Both had their reasons for spreading anti-Armenian publicity. For the French, it was an attempt to divert the attention of the Syrian nationalists from pressing issues such as the promulgation of the Constitution. For the Soviet authorities, it was the desire to fight against their ideological and political opponents – the ARF. Part of the “Armenian national home” anti-Armenian polemic and the politicization of the entire Armenian refugee community of Syria resulted from

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<sup>520</sup> HHA archives, fond 1, list 26, file 47, cited in Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk*, 197; Taline Ter Minassian, “La politique soviétique au Moyen-Orient et les minorités du début des années 20 jusqu’à la veille de la Guerre Froide” (Institut d’Etudes Politique de Paris, 1995), 2:687.

<sup>521</sup> Cholakian, *Suriahay Dprotci Patmutyun*, 1:211.



this intra-Armenian political struggle that transcended the boundaries of the Armenian community. Such press campaigns were soon launched in the Arabic language press of Syria and Lebanon, which also fed the nationalist press. Thus, observations based solely on the Syrian nationalist press of Damascus, which portrayed a hostile (Syrian) attitude towards the Armenian refugees, are misleading. While Soviet authorities wished to expose only one section of these refugees – the ARF supporters, the Syrian press made no distinction, usually referring to “Armenians” without further elaboration.

Soviet Armenian authorities by now effectively claimed to represent the Ottoman Armenians too, which they had initially refused out of fears of strengthening ARF’s role in Soviet Armenia and the Caucasus.<sup>522</sup> Thus, the attitude of the Soviet authorities vis-à-vis the Ottoman Armenians needs to be analyzed through the lenses of their struggle with the ARF since its inception.

The Soviet authorities in both Moscow and Yerevan, in their turn, had good reasons for exposing the ARF, their principal ideological opponent, because of wider geostrategic developments in the Middle East and globally. Thus, the other layers of this anti-Armenian polemic were externally connected with the Kurdish rebellion in Ararat, the creation of Khoybun, Khoybun-ARF cooperation, ARF-Ramkavar rapprochement, Syria becoming a transit hub through the construction of the Mosul-Tripoli pipeline, Gulbenkian’s efforts to secure employment for the Armenian refugees and his commitment of substantial funds to Syria coupled with a reluctance to do the same for Soviet Armenia.

Moreover, the coordinated efforts of the AGBU, French, and LoN to settle the Armenian refugees of Syria permanently, the third Armenian exodus from Turkey and their settlement in Jazira, as well as attempts to transfer more refugees from Greece to Syria, coupled with the paranoia and isolation of the USSR were other significant reasons. All these factors, taken together, had given both Moscow and Yerevan the idea that imperialist plots were being hatched and the “Armenian home” in the making was a revitalization of the still-born Treaty of Sèvres and would create a buffer zone between the West and Russia. If Soviet leaders in Moscow took measures to secure the Caucasian front against imperialist plots by initiating Armenian repatriation to empty Syria of its Armenian population, Soviet Armenian leaders took even more radical measures to cut employment opportunities for the Armenian refugees of the Syrian

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<sup>522</sup> Artak Darbinyan, *Hay Azatagrakan Sharjman Ozerin: Husher, 1890-1940* [During the Days of the Armenian Liberation Movement: Memoirs, 1890-1940] (Paris, 1947), 309-318. Karlen Dallakyan, *Aknarkner Spyurkahay Hasarakakan Metki Patmutyan (1920akn tvakanner)* [Reflections on the History of the Armenian Thoughts in Diaspora, during the 1920s] (Yerevan: 1994), 10.

Jazira in their attempt to fight against potential competition from the alleged “Armenian home.” In this way, the Soviet Armenian authorities aimed to position Armenia as the only *legitimate homeland* for *all* the Armenians by claiming “its refugees” and rendering the Jazira settlement futile.

In the Armenian historiography (Soviet and other sources), the Armenian state is usually regarded as the nuclear center – the *homeland* that united all the Armenian communities worldwide. However, in this dissertation, I have argued that Soviet Armenia in the 1920s and even 1930s did not enjoy either symbolic legitimacy or recognition as an uncontested homeland for *all* the Ottoman Armenian refugees.<sup>523</sup> It did not do so for at least two interrelated reasons. First, the Armenian Republic (before and after Soviet rule) was not the *birthplace* of the Ottoman Armenian refugees. Second, other projects, the so-called “national homes” for the Ottoman refugees, ran in parallel for quite some time. It is no surprise that Karlen Dallakyan, a renowned Soviet statesman and historian, considered the formative years of the Armenian diaspora the timeframe between the signature of the Lausanne Treaty (1923) and 1932. Moreover, 1932 marked the collapse of the most dangerous rival project – the “national home” in the Syria Jazira, which competed with Soviet Armenia and challenged its legitimacy as the unique *homeland*. However, the status of Soviet Armenia as the sole Armenian homeland for ex-Ottoman Armenians after 1932 was not the result of natural evolution. Soviet Armenia was, therefore, compelled to fight to attract the Ottoman Armenian refugees and to combat the “Armenian homes,” which it did with vigorous press campaigns and hastily organized repatriations.

Yet these repatriations are treated uncritically in the Armenian historiography (Soviet and other sources) with few exceptions. Was the engagement of Soviet Armenia toward the Ottoman refugees really unconditional, apolitical, and purely humanitarian, as claimed by the Armenian historians and politicians? How to explain that a country unable to provide for its own starving population and with limited resources was eager to host more people? Were all the Armenian refugees welcomed regardless of their material conditions, class, personal status, and political affiliations? Was this newly established state, even if “purely Armenian” in nature, a “natural” choice for the Ottoman Armenian refugees? Put differently, was it the uncontested “homeland” for all the Armenians? The answers to these questions, as demonstrated in this dissertation, were far from being self-evident.

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<sup>523</sup> For the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu both symbolic legitimacy and recognition are vital symbols for legitimacy. Bourdieu Pierre, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l’action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 115.

I have argued that the so-called repatriations organized by Soviet Armenia throughout the interwar years should be considered in the context of positioning Soviet Armenia as the only legitimate homeland for *all* the Armenians and in relation to its efforts to fight against all other competing projects. In that regard, I have demonstrated that Soviet authorities were eager to accept the Ottoman Armenian refugees for their own interests. For one thing, they had strict preselection criteria and a few important pre-conditions – the transportation and living costs of all the refugees were to be paid in advance by a third party. Thus, the refugees presented an excellent opportunity to receive highly beneficial foreign aid and funding. In the same vein, refugees were easier to exploit as a labor force, for they had to work much harder than the locals to succeed. The achievements at home, such as the massive construction works and successful agricultural colonies, all realized thanks to foreign aid and the refugees' hard work, were advertised as development and progress in Armenia to boost the image of the local authorities and overall Soviet prestige abroad, and to present Soviet Armenia as the ultimate homeland. To achieve these goals, however, Soviet Armenia had to compete against all the alternative settlement projects, ensure the flow of all available funds to Armenia and make certain there was only one legitimate homeland – Soviet Armenia.

In this regard, I have shown that the refugee settlement project that challenged Soviet ambitions the most had emerged in Syria. The Soviet and French mandatory authorities asked for financial support and political backing from the LoN. These two seemingly humanitarian projects quickly became two rival political agendas after the initial funds collected by the Nansen Office for the Sardarapat irrigation scheme in Soviet Armenia were eventually allocated for the Jazira settlement in Syria. Once again, an “Armenian national home” under imperialist control threatened Soviet Armenia. Dallakyan was quite explicit in his explanation: “The connotation of the “Armenian home” caused immense anxiety (in Soviet Armenia), a hasty decision was taken to organize the repatriation, as a counterbalance to the “Armenian home,” thus aborting the imperialistic plot.”<sup>524</sup>

The danger of the “Armenian home” took another form at the beginning of the 1930s in relation to recent regional and global geopolitical events. When the first difficulties of the Armenian refugees emerged in Greece, first in 1924, then in 1930, and subsequently, the LoN and other international organizations intervened to transfer them to Syria and *not* to Soviet Armenia, it created a sovereignty crisis among the Soviet authorities of Armenia. The fears that an “Armenian home” similar to the Jewish home in Palestine was discreetly in the making in

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<sup>524</sup> Karlen Dallakyan, *H.B.E Miuytan Nakhagah G. Gulbenkiani Hrajarakani Hartsj Shurj* [On the Resignation of the AGBU Head G. Gulbenkian] (Yerevan, 1996), 83.

Syria were revived. In the beginning, Soviet authorities organized repatriations to attract foreign investment and enhance their humanitarian reputation. Subsequently, the Soviet authorities did their best to ensure the failure of the rival “home” project in Syria. It was obvious that neither had Soviet Armenia become the natural homeland nor were its rulers recognized as legitimate during the entire 1920s and well into the 1930s. Soviet Armenia, therefore, needed to position itself as the only legitimate homeland. A dynamic similar to that of the later Cold War emerged.

Soviet Armenian authorities tirelessly fought against the shadow of the “Armenian home” in Syria, taking advantage of the rare instances when the interests of Yerevan and Moscow overlapped. It is important to remember that Moscow had initiated the first repatriations on the condition that Armenia became a major cotton-producing country.<sup>525</sup> The construction of irrigation channels for which Moscow willingly paid was not done for the refugee settlements but for cotton production.

Armenian authorities also benefited from the temporary but favorable policies dictated by Moscow to settle their issues related to their internal power struggles. The accusation against Gulbenkian was one such instance that had far-reaching consequences for the Armenians in Syria. At the beginning of the 1930s, amid the economic crisis and harsh drought in the Syrian Jazira, Armenian refugees lost a precious employment opportunity. This resulted in the departure of many refugees from the problematic borderland and Syria. However, the exodus was short-lived.

Paradoxically, Armenian settlements in Syria and Jazira prospered thanks to the indifference of the “self-proclaimed homeland.” By the mid-1940s, their political integration was complete. The Armenians’ transition from “guests” to “citizens” was also accomplished when, after numerous challenges, the community stood clearly on the Syrian side. Nevertheless, paradoxically, at the precise moment when they had moved from being regarded as “harmful strangers” to being accepted as “loyal, valuable, and useful citizens,” the community would unanimously decide to leave Syria. They had overcome the Syrian nationalist and the French colonial traps, but not the third one – Soviet Armenia. The repatriation of 1931–1932 was the first Soviet battle against the “Armenian national home” of Syria but not the last. Since the Syrian Jazira continued effectively to compete with Soviet Armenia as a major refugee settlement site, Soviet Armenia would return to fight and eventually destroy it.

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<sup>525</sup> The results were telling. In 1919 there were only 500 hectares of cotton fields it reached to 18,200 hectares in 1930. “Hayastani Tentesakan Harajadimutyune” [The Economic Development of Armenia], *Arev*, February 13, 1931, 2. To encourage cotton cultivation, Soviet authorities allocated 10,000 rubles in the budget of 1929-30 as an award for the new and current cultivators, see in “Mertsanak Bambaki Mshakutyun Hamar” [Award for the Cultivation of Cotton], *Hayrenik*, December 31, 1929, 1.

## Concluding remarks

This dissertation has told the history of the Armenian refugee community in Syria during the French mandate between 1918 and 1946. It has done so by investigating the immediate pre-mandate years and the long mandatory period, zooming in on three major events – the acquisition of citizenship and voting rights, the Syrian Revolt, and the Jazira settlement scheme – that served as turning points in the construction of the post-genocide Armenian refugee community in Syria. The ultimate goal of this work was to interrogate the impact of the incoming refugee community in the formation of the Syrian state in the interwar years by adopting a non-state and bottom-up approach.

The Armenian refugee experience in interwar Syria has largely been depicted in Western historiography along sectarian lines. In these accounts, Armenian refugees are portrayed as convenient colonizing tools in the hands of the French mandatory power to fight Arab nationalism. The perceived “natural” alliance between the French and the incoming Christian, non-Arab Armenian refugees has rarely been questioned. In the same vein, the recurrent anti-refugee discourse was often justified by the presumed hostility on the part of the Muslim Syrians toward the incoming Christian refugees. By zooming in on all major instances in which such anti-refugee discourse was displayed, this dissertation has told a different story.

By shifting the focus from the French mandatory authorities and the Syrian nationalists to the Armenian refugee community, this dissertation has tried to understand whether Syrian hosts were overwhelmingly hostile toward the refugees and whether these refugees were tools in the hands of the French colonial power. In the same vein, it aimed to interrogate whether their settlement patterns were pure colonial undertakings or, at times, the refugees themselves were able to put forward their own agendas and influence certain Syrian and French policies. The findings revealed unexpected patterns providing new insights into the manifestations of the refugee agency and its impact.

Throughout the pages of this work, I have explored the quest for belonging of the Armenian refugees in Mandate Syria. By showing the following: the common experience of displacement and how it subsumed a great variety of Ottoman Armenians under one single category – “refugees,” the indelible trauma of uprooting, the internal diversity of the refugees who were not only culturally different from the hosts and the non-refugee Armenians but were

not culturally homogenous themselves,<sup>1</sup> and the often divisive existence of refugee political parties and other organizations, this dissertation has demonstrated the diversity of their reactions and strategies regarding key issues such as belonging, citizenship, and voting rights, and also loyalty, the settlement schemes, and their relations with various players.

This research has revealed that far from being passive executors, Armenian refugees were, in fact, caught between three different state-building projects and two “homelands” – Syria and Soviet Armenia – and has shown how their agency mattered. The three state-building projects that revolved around the Armenian refugees were those of the French mandatory power, the Syrian hosts, and the Soviet authorities. All three projects had in mind distinct roles for these refugees. For example, refugees were seen as important agents of “development” for the French mandatory authorities because they offered a cheap and abundant workforce with the potential to achieve modernizing projects to prove the successful implementation of the mandate. The “integration and assimilation” of the refugees into the host society as a hardworking, surplus population, preferably in the agricultural colonies, was one of the main demands of the Syrian hosts. As for the Soviet authorities, the refugee-homeland nexus and “repatriations” were intended to unilaterally claim these refugees to serve wider Soviet political purposes, ranging from development to relief from diplomatic isolation.

By focusing on the internal dynamics and events within the refugee community and integrating other powerful actors – Soviet Armenia, USSR, and Turkey – whose actions and policies had a profound impact on the events in Syria, in general, and on the Armenian refugees, in particular, this dissertation not only challenged the accounts that portrayed Armenians as a homogenous community but also demonstrated the virtual impossibility of having the entire community aligned with one single player.

Indeed, Armenian-Syrian, Armenian-French, as well as Armenian-Soviet relations were complex and multifaceted. By documenting the ideological and political divisions among the refugees, the conflicting interests, and competing projects among the different blocs, this research helped wipe away the simplistic images of i) Armenian refugees being the “natural” allies of the French mandatory power, ii) “Muslim Syrian hosts” being overwhelmingly hostile to the incoming “Christian Refugees,” and iii) Soviet Armenia being the “natural” homeland of the Armenian refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> A similar observation is made in regard to the Minor Asian refugees who arrived in Greece as a result of population exchange, see for example, Elizabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922 - 1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 337.

Instead, this dissertation has demonstrated that the Syrian attitude vis-à-vis the refugees was far from being one-dimensional. It has done so by drawing a clear distinction between the Syrian nationalists in Damascus and the political elite in Aleppo and showing that their attitudes toward the refugees were diametrically opposed. By documenting how the suggestion to “nationalize” the Armenian refugees through extending them local citizenship came from the political elite of Aleppo, as opposed to accounts claiming French-biased policies toward the Armenians, this dissertation suggests that citizenship and belonging in French mandatory Syria must be considered beyond the linear sectarian perspective.

In the same vein, this dissertation has shown that Armenian-French relations were multi-dimensional. While French authorities were successful in aligning one segment of the refugee elites (ARF) toward them, it is problematic to assume a static or “natural” alliance between the two. By showing the strict neutrality of all segments of the Armenian refugee community during the Syrian Revolt, the secret ties of two rival Armenian blocs – the ARF and pro-Soviet forces – with the Syrian rebels, the French ban on leading ARF figures entering Syria during the elections, and the documented French complaints about the ARF disloyalty vis-à-vis the French, the multi-dimensional character of these relations have been clearly exposed.

Furthermore, I have shown how French authorities did not hesitate to label the entire refugee community for political purposes by narrating different episodes, including the Cilicia evacuation, the Aleppo massacre, the Damascus camp incident, and refugee settlement policies, as well as the circulation of the contentious term “Armenian national home.”

Such French efforts were supplemented by the policies of other powerful actors for their own political goals. If such French policies vis-à-vis the Armenian refugees were chiefly exercised during important political events, another external power – Turkey, for example, continually employed similar tactics. This dissertation documents several instances where Turkish propaganda tried to systematically and skillfully direct the anger and frustration of the Syrians toward the incoming Armenian refugees, who were held responsible for the French presence. A deliberate attempt was also made to link the unwanted French mandate with the presence of the Christian refugees in a way that one justified the other. Therefore, the Turkish role in framing the Armenian refugees as the “allies” of the mandatory power, still dominant in Western historiography, should not be downgraded or overlooked.

Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated that the images of the refugees as “allies of the colonizing French power” or “the brother of the Arabs fighting against the imperialist French yoke” were, in fact, actively created, shaped, and often contested in the Syrian nationalist press by powerful external players, namely, Turkey, Soviet Armenia, and the

USSR. These players did so by exercising influence either on one segment of the refugee population or the Syrian nationalist parties. In addition, the fierce internal struggle among the refugee leaders contributed to the polarization and politicization of the Armenian refugee community. Indeed, this dissertation has shown that a substantial part of the anti-Armenian discourse in the Syrian press resulted from the internal power struggle between the two rival Armenian blocs – the ARF and the pro-Soviet forces – that transcended the boundaries of their community as well as the borders of Syria.

By zooming in on the large-scale refugee settlements in the Syrian Jazira on the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi borderlands, this dissertation has demonstrated the degree to which local actors in the borderlands were independent of both the state and mandatory authorities in their actions and alliances.

The creation of a Model village and similar settlements in the Syrian Jazira, which started as a result of a collaboration between the local Arab tribes, the Armenian refugees, and the trusted missionary, Karen Jeppe, is a case in point. In parallel to the fears of the Syrian nationalists that a new Armenian homeland was in creation on the far-away borderlands, more Arabic tribes doubled their efforts to have such Armenian villages that promised prosperity.

By documenting the periodic publications about the alleged “Armenian national home” in both the French-subsidized papers and the Syrian nationalist press, this dissertation has shown the territorialization of the homeland for both the Syrian hosts and the Armenian refugees. Alarmed about the dangers of French-Armenian colonization, Syrian hosts were compelled to “Syrianize” the Syrian Jazira, which was accomplished by the end of the mandate. Hence, the settlement of the refugees in the borderlands was not only an interplay between humanitarianism and state-building but also an important tool of boundary-making.<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, Armenian refugees evoked discourses of “true belonging” and “real homeland,” the consequences of which were far-reaching, as the refugees ultimately brought a new player – Soviet Armenia – to the Syrian scene. To be sure, these refugees neither shared any previous ties with the claimed “homeland,” since it was not their birthplace nor did they necessarily endorse communism. By integrating Soviet Armenia as a major player, this dissertation has shown how Armenian refugee elites elaborated the discourse of a new “homeland” to counterbalance the French and Syrian projects revolving around them.

The publications on and rumors about the alleged “Armenian national home” in the Syrian Jazira, on the other hand, aroused the fears of the Soviet authorities in both Yerevan and

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<sup>2</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Rethinking State and Border Formation in the Middle East: Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands, 1921-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 61.



Moscow, who regarded this borderland suspiciously as a frontier between the imperialist and Soviet worlds. The exaggerated Soviet fears demanded that the Syrian Jazira be emptied of its Armenian populations. It was against this backdrop that Armenian settlements in the Syrian Jazira became intimately connected with the repatriations initiated by the Soviet authorities. I have shown how Soviet Armenia became the only authentic Armenian homeland – the center – after it had managed to successfully empty the Syrian Jazira of Armenians.

Overall, this dissertation has touched upon important questions such as identity and community construction, belonging, citizenship, loyalty, and labeling on the one hand, and relations with the host community, including the local, non-refugee Armenian residents and the colonial power on the other. As a result, this research has contributed to several interrelated fields of studies: refugee studies broadly and refugee history specifically, as well as borderland and subaltern studies by adopting a transnational approach.

### **Refugees and State formation: A history from below**

Above all, this dissertation has sought to reveal how the Armenian refugees and their political elite negotiated their place and status in Syria by showing the ability of the refugees to construct identity and to provoke discourses of belonging and citizenship not only among the Syrian hosts but also among the refugees themselves. In this sense, this dissertation contributes to the discussions of state formation in Syria, confirming historian Peter Gatrell's assertion that while "refugees are the products of state-led practices, they also help to constitute the modern nation-state."<sup>3</sup> It has done so by putting the Armenian refugees at the center of the analysis, thus treating them as fully pledged actors instead of objects through the extensive use of sources produced by the refugees and their political leaders.

The use of refugee-produced sources and their treatment as actors helps avoid "dehistoricizing universalism"; that is, considering these refugees as voiceless victims instead of historical actors in their own right.<sup>4</sup> For a long time, Armenian language sources have been ignored or overlooked by scholars when describing the Armenian genocide or the ensuing refugee experience of the survivors by the Western scholars "so as not to be accused of using 'tainted,' 'biased,' or 'manipulated' material."<sup>5</sup> Recently, however, an effort has been made to

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), x.

<sup>4</sup> Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11:3 (1996), 377-404, 378.

<sup>5</sup> Khatchig Mouradian, "Genocide and Humanitarian Resistance in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1917," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Clark University, 2016), 3.

“recover the refugee voices,”<sup>6</sup> including those of the Ottoman Armenian refugees, not only through scholarly work but also other initiatives, such as *Houshamadyan*,<sup>7</sup> seeking to value the Armenian material and immaterial heritage (e.g., songs, cuisine).

Capturing refugee voices and critically analyzing them makes it possible to write a different history of refugeedom, one that is uneven and full of internal diversity and contradictions and does not homogenize “refugee voices into one coherent story.”<sup>8</sup> The result is ultimately a more nuanced picture of both the refugees’ agency and the states’ power over the refugees.

The manifestation of refugees’ agency does not mean that refugees were always successful in their efforts or that they achieved complete empowerment.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the manifestation of refugee agency meant “interdependence”.<sup>10</sup> When engaging with refugee voices, it is important to remember that these voices may be structured through the refugee regimes but also through “social, cultural and diaspora networks within which refugees were embedded.”<sup>11</sup> This, in turn means that often refugees appealed to their political elites requesting their support which often was in the form of the intermediary roles evoking the dominant cultural and social values.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this dissertation has documented numerous cases when Armenian political leaders served as brokers and intermediaries.

It was true that Armenian refugees were effectively instrumentalized by diverse organizations and bodies – including Armenian national bodies, churches, and political parties, as well as the French mandatory authorities, the LoN’s refugee regime, Turkey, and the Soviet authorities. However, the Armenian refugees and their political leaders were neither tools in the hands of the mandatory power nor passive executors of French policies. As the example of the creation and success of the “Model Village” showed, at times, refugees themselves were drivers of certain French policies through their actions and alliances. The large-scale refugee settlement schemes in the Syrian Jazira led by the French in collaboration with the LoN were largely built on the success of the Model Village.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghosal, Katarzyna Nowak, and Alex Dowdall, “Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History,” *Social History*, vol. 46:1, 70-95.

<sup>7</sup> Vahe Tachjian, *Houshamadyan: Ottoman Armenians: Life, Culture, Society* (Berlin: Houshamadyan, 2014), vol. 1.

<sup>8</sup> See also Gatrell et al., “Reckoning with Refugeedom,” 90, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Rethinking State and Border*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn M. Thomas, “Historicising Agency,” *Gender and History*, Vol. 28:2 (2016), 326. See also Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37:1 (2003), 113–24.

<sup>11</sup> Gatrell, et al., “Reckoning with Refugeedom,” 86.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

The internal disagreements and tensions between the French mandatory authorities in Paris, Beirut, and Deir ez-Zor and the ability of the refugees to navigate them was a clear demonstration of refugee agency. Refugee leaders, and the tribal sheiks who often entered into direct negotiations to establish “model villages” on the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi border space, which better corresponded to their own needs, is another example. The construction of Tell Brack, when Armenian refugee leaders entered into negotiations with the local authorities directly, often against the wishes of the French mandatory authorities, and which outlived the French mandate, is another remarkable example.

The struggle of the Armenian refugees and their elites for recognition and political rights and the use of citizenship as a form of protection is yet another manifestation of the refugee agency. This was evident not just at an elite level but also at a grass-roots level when refugees registered *en masse* to claim their new status.

Multiple examples have shown that the French mandatory authorities were not always in a dominant position and the refugee leaders were not the voiceless executors of their orders. Instead, their relations are better understood in terms of constant tension in which different tactics were exercised by both sides, including contradictory discourses and pledges, negotiations, pressure, and compromises, among others.

Crucially, the cooperation of the refugees and their political leaders in the success of the Jazira settlement scheme cannot be overlooked. As demonstrated throughout this research, the Jazira scheme took a new turn after two important Armenian organizations endorsed it and pledged significant funds, which assured the refugees and convinced them to be resettled.

By showing the competition between the French and Soviet authorities for the Armenian refugees, this dissertation has documented how the refugee presence and their labor were used in both states for the same purposes. First, refugee labor was needed for the production of cotton; second, refugees were used as important agents of development; third, by hosting refugees, both states claimed additional foreign funds and enhanced their reputation as refugee-hosting states. Moreover, this work has shown how refugees, far from being a burden on the host state, served as valuable elements contributing to the development of the host country – be it Syria or Soviet Armenia, and how international settlement efforts were far from being “purely humanitarian” endeavors.

In the same vein, Armenian refugees were not merely recipients of humanitarian aid. They had to pay back the settlement costs. Thus, Syrian Jazira was neither a purely colonial settlement nor a humanitarian project as presented until now. Instead, as some scholars have argued with regard to the interplay between refugees and state-making in the South Asian

continent, the “refugee rehabilitation” campaigns advocated by both states and the LoN sought to transform these refugee-citizens into agents of development or, in Uditi’s words, “developmental citizens” capable of performing economic transformation.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the suggested “solution” to the refugee “problem” was motivated by economic gains rather than by “genuine” humanitarian concerns around “rescuing” the refugees from unhygienic refugee camps to settle them in “empty places”,<sup>14</sup> as was propagated officially.<sup>15</sup>

Although resettlement was also the wish of most refugees, the process was not straightforward. Most refugees initially resisted resettlement because of the fear of being relocated to the faraway regions that had served as graveyards for thousands of Armenians during the deportations. The creation of trust, the involvement of refugees’ political leaders as intermediaries, and the lessons learned became the keys to success. Within this context, the role of refugee elites was significant, not only in establishing rural colonies but also in creating urban neighborhoods as well as forming the community in general. For one thing, it was the refugee elites who, together with the church, established schools in all refugee camps, insisted on the teaching of the Armenian language, published newspapers, and committed themselves to the education of the new generation. Ultimately, they aimed to reconcile the double status of refugees – their Armenian-ness with being loyal citizens of Syria. By doing so, they put forward their alternative vision of nation-building instead of blindly following French resettlement schemes. Although everyday resistance was the norm for the peasant refugees or those who had no choice but to be settled in the agricultural colonies, it did not amount to an alternative vision.

Further study is nevertheless needed to understand the agency of the women, who were not only employed in large numbers in various workshops but most refugee households were also led by women.

By focusing on refugees, borderlands dynamics, and the role played by multiple actors in the integration of post-Ottoman Armenians in French mandated Syria, this dissertation has

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<sup>13</sup> Sen Uditi, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 242. See also Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and The Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>14</sup> More on “empty places,” see Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017). For the link between the redistribution of “surplus population” and establishing their numerical strength in order to turn refugees into “settlers,” see Sir John Hope Simpson, “The Refugee Problem,” *International Affairs* 17, N:5 (1938), 607-628; see also, Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939); Anne Schult, “Interwar Statistics, Colonial Demography, and the Making of the Twentieth-century Refugee,” *Journal of Global History*, (2022), 1-21.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar process that occurred in India after Partition, see Uditi, *Citizen Refugee*. For Greece, see Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia*.

suggested a non-statist and decentered approach, thereby contributing to “writing refugeedom into refugee history.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Transnational and connected histories**

In addition, this dissertation has adopted the transnational approach as a framework by showing how several apparently irrelevant or unconnected events and episodes were actually connected.<sup>17</sup> Hence, this dissertation has argued that it is impossible to comprehend the political developments in Syria, the position of the various Armenian political blocs, and the policies of the external actors without considering their multi-layered alliances, the increasing polarization, and the overall geopolitical context along with the interconnectedness of the events.

Many aspects of the Armenian refugee story are better understood from a transnational perspective. They include the following: the activities of the Armenian political parties and philanthropic organizations; the link between conflicting claims over Cilicia in the Paris Peace Conference and the Aleppo massacre; the Citizenship Act in Syria and its link to intensified communist propaganda among the Armenian refugee community; the division of the Armenian refugees over the Syrian Revolt; the exaggerated fears of the Soviet authorities and their propaganda actions in Syria in the framework of the story of the “Armenian national home;” the connection between the Turkish-backed international fact-finding mission and the future large-scale refugee settlement scheme; and, finally, the competition for funds between the Nansen-backed Yerevan settlement scheme and the ICRC, ILO-backed Syrian Jazira scheme.

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The Armenian refugee experience in interwar Syria was certainly not unique. Instead, it is better comprehended by placing its history alongside other histories of the twentieth century, marked by violence, ethnic cleansing, and inmixing of peoples. Likewise, neither violent displacement and uprooting nor the refugee settlements were new.

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<sup>16</sup> Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, “What is Refugee History Now?,” *Journal of Global History*, N:17:1 (2022), 11-19.

<sup>17</sup> See also, Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Oztan, “The Special Issue ‘Forced Migration and Refugeedom in the Modern Middle East’ Towards Connected Histories of Refugeedom in the Middle East,” *Journal of Migration History*, N: 6 (2020), 1-15.

In the aftermath of WWI, the inmixing of people was considered necessary for the consolidation of the nation-states that had emerged from the ruins of the Empires.<sup>18</sup> Addressing refugee problems, therefore, had become part of the state-building projects, which included resettlement, integration, and development to address political, economic, and national security issues.<sup>19</sup> Since large concentrations of refugees were not desirable in urban centers given the revolutionary climate of the immediate post-war years, refugee resettlement projects in profitable agricultural schemes that ensured quick capital generation and modernization, and, at the same time, made refugees self-sufficient quickly gained momentum. Crucially, such endeavors were led and executed by the newly established LoN as a mixture of humanitarianism “subordinated to the demands of twentieth-century nationalism and the persistence of late colonialism.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, refugee resettlement in profitable agricultural colonies was not unique to the Armenian refugees in the Syrian Jazira. It was modeled on a similar exercise previously successfully undertaken in Greece during the resettlement of Asia Minor refugees after the population exchange.<sup>21</sup> In this case, too, economic considerations were subordinate to the questions of national defense on the borderlands and ethnic homogeneity while providing the necessary labor force.<sup>22</sup> Similar developmental projects took prominence in India with the partition refugees, as well as Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries.<sup>23</sup>

With time, newly built neighborhoods came to replace the refugee camps inhabited by Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon, but the camps never disappeared. Instead, they would receive new refugees in the wake of Israel’s creation and the arrival of Palestinian refugees.<sup>24</sup> Later, more refugees arrived from the south of Lebanon and settled in camps in Beirut after the successive Israeli invasions. Similarly, Syrian towns and borderland regions, too, would become home to Kurdish refugees who fled violence and dispossession. Today, a hundred years

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<sup>18</sup> Aristide R. Zolberg, “The Formation of New States as a Refugee-Generating Process,” in *The Global Refugee Problem: U.S. and World Response. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 467 (1983), 24–38.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*, 161.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this resettlement, see Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia*.

<sup>22</sup> Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia*, 330-331, for more on how the population exchange was used as “national reconstruction” in both Greece and Turkey, see also Onur Yıldırım, “The 1923 population exchange, refugees and national historiographies in Greece and Turkey,” *East European Quarterly*, 40, no. 1, (2006), 45-70.

<sup>23</sup> For partition refugees, see Uditi, *Citizen Refugee*; Zamindar, *The Long Partition*.

<sup>24</sup> For the presence of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and their impact, see Ilana Feldman, “Conflicted Presence: The Many Arrivals of Palestinians in Lebanon,” *Migration Studies*, N: 10:2, (2022), 190-213; Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

after the Armenian Genocide, it was the Syrian hosts who fled Syria taking the same routes that the Ottoman Armenians had taken previously but in the opposite direction. Millions of Syrians fled to Turkey, as well as other neighboring countries, and thousands of others are internally displaced, most inhabiting refugee camps across the country.<sup>25</sup>

Today, the histories of the Syrians and Armenians remain intimately connected. As was the case a century ago, Ankara and Moscow aim at re-examining, claiming, and contesting the southern (Turkish-Syrian) and northern (Turkish-Armenian) borders simultaneously.<sup>26</sup> Now, as before, dominance over Syria and Armenia means controlling the new communication and trade routes over which a fierce international battle is ongoing at the time of writing.<sup>27</sup>

The contemporary period, marked by great uncertainties, competition for resources and new trade routes, as well as for power and influence, has many striking similarities with that of the recent past. Looking back at the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gives us a unique opportunity to learn from history and, perhaps, anticipate the future.

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<sup>25</sup> Vanessa Agnew, Kader Konuk, Jane O. Newman, ed., *Refugee Routes: Telling Looking, Protesting, Redressing*, The Academy in Exile Book Series, vol. 1 (Verlag: 2020). After more than a decade of crisis, Syria counts more than 6,7 million internally displaced, in addition to 6,6 million as refugees, mostly in neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan) <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (accessed on August 6, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Alexander E. Balistreri, "Revisiting Millî: Borders and the Making of the Turkish Nation State," in *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946*, ed. Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakki Öztan (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 29-59. "Erdogan and Putin to Meet in Sochi for 2<sup>nd</sup> Time in a Month," *Voanews*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/erdogan-and-putin-to-meet-in-sochi-for-2nd-time-in-a-month/6686780.html> (accessed on August 6, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Christina Muller-Markus, "One Belt, One Road: The Chinese Dream and Its Impact on Europe," *Notes Internationals, CIDOB*, N: 148, (May 2016); Jennifer Hillman and Alex Tippett, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Forcing Europe to Reckon with China?," Council on Foreign Relations, April 27, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/belt-and-road-initiative-forcing-europe-reckon-china> (accessed on January 5, 2023).

## Epilogue: The rise and the fall of the Armenian Jazira

In Armenia, every child is required to go to school. There are wonderful places for the children to play and they are constantly supervised by adults trained in pedagogy. The children are brought to school by train and have special classes in theater, music, dance, and visual art...<sup>1</sup>

In June 1945, hardly a month after the Armistice, a high-level Armenian Congress met to elect the All Armenian Catholicose. On this occasion, plans regarding a new, *massive* repatriation initiative by “the Great Stalin” were also revealed.<sup>2</sup> Stalin’s decree appeared simultaneously in *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, and *Sovetakan Hayastan* on November 21, 1945.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this call, more than 100,000 Armenians would arrive between 1946 and 1949.<sup>4</sup> This repatriation is relatively better studied than the previous ones.<sup>5</sup> As before, Soviet Armenia was not ready to host any repatriates let alone those arriving in large numbers. Although no fighting had taken place in Armenia, its economy was ruined, acute housing issues continued, and industry and agriculture were slow to recover. The country had also suffered great human losses.<sup>6</sup> In addition to economic, social, and demographic problems, it was also hit by an unusual drought in 1946.<sup>7</sup> The repatriation initiative rested entirely with the central Soviet authorities in Moscow.

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<sup>1</sup> “What use would her modest life and hard work be, if Simonig (Azniv’s son) continued to live in a foreign land and after years of deprivation barely knew how to read or write? What use would this series of proud, half-starving days be for a respectable widow like Azniv, if her only son continued to grow up in a polluted environment full of dirty shacks, subjected to poor teachers and the disdain of the local children? What would really happen to Simonig, her only son, if he got his diploma? After begging a thousand people, Azniv would barely be able to get him an apprenticeship. Maybe he would be clever enough to steer clear of those men who fill the cafés of the refugee camps, drowning their daily disgust in card games, vodka, and Turkish curses until their surroundings slowly started to feel like home, but all the while marring the Armenian spirit beyond recognition. But Simonig, so sensitive and excitable, would be driven into the claws of those men at the first sign of failure. It had happened to the children of so many other decent families.” Siran Seza, *Meghavoruhin* [The Sinning Women], trans., Jennifer Maanoukian (Beirut, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Claire Mouradian, “L’immigration des Arméniens de la diaspora vers la RSS d’Arménie 1946–1962,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, vol. 20 :1, (Janvier -Mars 1979), 79-110, 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> Jo Laycock, “The Repatriation of Armenians to Soviet Armenia” in *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in The Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945-50*, ed., Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 143.

<sup>4</sup> NAA, file 362, list 50, file 1, 7; NAA fond 362, list 27, file 1, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Mouradian, L’immigration; S. Pattie, “From The Centres to The Periphery: “Repatriation” to an Armenian Homeland in the Twentieth Century,” in *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, ed., F. Markowitz and H. Stefansson, (Lexington Books, 2004), 109–24; Laycock, “Armenian Homelands;” M. Lehmann, “A Different Kind of Brothers: Exclusion and Partial Integration after Repatriation to a Soviet “Homeland,”” *Ab Imperio* vol. 3 (2012), 171–211; Laycock, “Belongings: People and Possessions in the Armenian Repatriations 1945–49,” *Kritika* vol. 18:3 (2017), 511–537, Ani Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki Patmutyune, 1946-1970* [The History of the Armenian Community of Syria, 1946-1970], (Yerevan, 2018), chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Half a million Armenians served in the Red Army, of whom 170,000 never returned, see in Peter Gatrell, “Displacing and Re-Placing Population in The Two World Wars: Armenia and Poland Compared,” *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 16:4 (November 2007), 511-527, 516.

<sup>7</sup> Laycock, “The Repatriation of Armenians,” 143.



Stalin's decree arrived at a time when the USSR was undertaking intense diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. Thus, more than the demographic or economic considerations, it was clear that this repatriation was to serve Soviet diplomatic and strategic purposes and was yet another rare instance when Yerevan's and Moscow's interests overlapped.<sup>8</sup> Soviet diplomats had already intensified their contacts with the Armenian communities in the Levant long before.<sup>9</sup> If, in the 1920s, it was Turkey that served as a platform for infiltrating neighboring countries, 20 years later, this was reversed. Ironically, as demonstrated by Tejel; this time, the pro-Soviet sentiments of the Armenians and also Kurds were supported by the British and French in Syria and Lebanon to steer them away from Nazi propaganda.<sup>10</sup>

Moscow opened its first diplomatic legation in Cairo in August 1943 and another in Beirut a year later. In the latter case, Moscow hurried to recognize the independence of Syria and Lebanon and was the first power to do so.<sup>11</sup> In July 1944, Novikov, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo, and his secretary Drepov visited Beirut, Damascus, and Aleppo and met with Mardam in Bludan.<sup>12</sup> In September 1944, Moscow appointed Solod as its ambassador to Syria and Lebanon. The activities of the communist party also took a new turn, once again marked by "nationalism" rather than by communist doctrines.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly, Moscow positioned itself as the "protector of oppressed national minorities" and the future liberator of the Kurds and Armenians.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the Kurds, a political document pledged support for any Kurdish nationalist movement involved in military engagement in Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On 19 May 1945, Moscow annulled the Soviet-Turkish friendship of 1925, while a month later tried to exercise pressure on Turkey, making irredentist claims. Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 285, Suny, "Soviet Armenia," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed., R. Hovannisian, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); G. S. Harris, "The Soviet Union and Turkey," in *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: The Post-World War Two Era*, ed., W. Vucinich and I. Lederer, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, "La politique soviétique au Moyen-Orient et les minorités du début des années 20 jusqu'à la veille de la Guerre Froide" (Institut d'Etudes Politique de Paris, 1995), vol. 2; Melkonian demonstrates how in many Armenian communities (in Iran especially) Armenians were informed unofficially about Moscow's intentions to organize widescale repatriation to restore the historical Armenian territories, Melkonian, *The Armenian General Benevolent*, 352-353.

<sup>10</sup> Tejel, "First Encounters with the USSR: the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Syria and Lebanon, 1927-1946," (unpublished paper), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ter Minassian, "La politique soviétique," 2 :660, 662-663.

<sup>12</sup> CADN-SL 825, Information du 20 juillet 1944, N. V. Novikov, *Vospominaniye Diplomata, Zapiski, 1938-1947* [The Memories of a Diplomat, 1938-1946] (Moskva: Politizdat 1989), 208-244; Ter Minassian, "La politique soviétique," 664-665.

<sup>13</sup> Khaled Bakdesh announced that the Communist Party of Syria was not there to demand "social reforms" but to achieve a "national liberation," cited in Ter Minassian, "La politique soviétique," 676. On the "nationalism" of the Syrian Communist Party, see John K. Cooley, "The Shifting Sands of Arab Communism," *Problems of Communism*, vol. 24, (March-April 1975), 22-42; Moscow subsidized two newspapers in Beirut, one Arabic called *Saut al-Sha'b* and one Armenian *Joghoverdi Dzayn*.

<sup>14</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern: l'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris, les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), 291.

<sup>15</sup> Jordi Tejel, "First Encounters with the USSR," 16.

In the case of the Armenians, Stalin's decree invited them *home*. In order to appeal to wider circles of Armenians and overcome the suspicions and hesitations, the decree was accompanied by territorial claims from Turkey, demanding Kars and Ardahan.

The impact of this declaration on the Armenian communities worldwide was immediate. In Syria and Lebanon, crowded meetings took place in Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, and Zahle.<sup>16</sup> Moscow not only promised to claim the Armenian territories from Turkey if the Armenians agreed to move to Soviet Armenia in large numbers, but it also announced that the status of the Armenian Republic itself was in danger. Armenia was the smallest state and risked losing its Republic status to become an Autonomous region if it did not manage to grow its population rapidly.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it was a major nationalistic and patriotic duty for all the Armenians, regardless of their ideology, to support Soviet Armenia. Because Turkey did not allow any Armenians to immigrate, it further fuelled the nationalism of the Armenians. *Suria* published an "Open letter" against the Turkish attempts to hinder Armenian repatriation to Soviet Armenia.<sup>18</sup> This letter announced that Turkey was afraid to see so many Armenians returning. By returning, therefore, one would take revenge. *Nergaght* (ingathering) is our dream that comes true... those who are against it are traitors.<sup>19</sup>

As on previous occasions, this repatriation served to magnify the political divisions in the Armenian communities abroad, creating or renewing the hostilities and highlighting the previous dividing lines. This is why Sossie Kasbarian depicted this repatriation as yet another effort by the Soviet authorities to destabilize the diaspora.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, for Susan Pattie, "homeland" and "return" were a source of conflict rather than unity since "the concepts of return, homeland, and diaspora are all continually in the process of construction."<sup>21</sup>

As suggested by Laycock, the territorial claims were significant because of the need to portray Soviet Armenia as the *natural homeland* of all Armenians. It was also vital for the success of the repatriation scheme.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the repatriation call was accompanied by extensive propaganda. All the Soviet Armenian press, and most of the Armenian press abroad, began to spread pro-Soviet Armenia propaganda. Emigration to Armenia was presented as the only

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<sup>16</sup> C. Mouradian, *De Staline à Gorbachov, Histoire d'une République Soviétique : l'Arménie* (France: Ramsay 1990), 323-324

<sup>17</sup> Mouradian, "L'immigration," 82.

<sup>18</sup> *Suria* (1946-1960) was published in Aleppo to propagate pro-Soviet ideas and fight against the ARF. Its chief editor was Hovhannes Yazejian.

<sup>19</sup> Kharip, "Batc Namak, Gots Metkov: Turkere Nergaghtin Dem" [An Open Letter *Suria*, Closed Mind: Turks Against the Repatriation], *Suria*, June 7, 1947, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Sossie Kasbarian, "Refuge in the 'Homeland': The Syrians in Armenia," in *Aid to Armenia*, 167.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Pattie, "Longing and Belonging" cited in Laycock, "Armenian Homelands," 105.

<sup>22</sup> Jo Laycock, "The Repatriation," 145-146.

viable solution to overcome the label of “dirty foreigners.” The name “Armenian” was no longer to be associated with “refugees;” instead, it would mean a state. Armenians were no longer considered “stateless people” or “guests” in the foreign lands at the mercy of the local hospitality.<sup>23</sup> Repatriation was also shown to be the only solution for the preservation of the Armenian identity and Armenian traditions. Moreover, economic advantages were also highlighted: economic security in one of the most powerful, victorious countries, where everyone was promised adequate housing, job, free education, and the opportunity to (re)construct the homeland together.<sup>24</sup> “Soviet Armenia, the motherland, waited impatiently to welcome her children” where their “brothers and sisters lived.”<sup>25</sup>

If by initiating this repatriation, Moscow had wished to portray the USSR once again as the desired destination, boost its prestige as a victorious side, and put pressure on Turkey, the Armenian authorities, in their turn, rushed to use the opportunity for their own purposes. They wished to gain skilled labor, boost the economy and attract more funding for the reconstruction of the country that was interrupted a decade ago. Moreover, evidence suggests that over and above the economic concerns, the Armenian authorities sought to address two major unresolved issues; first, to position Soviet Armenia as the only legitimate “homeland” for *all* the Armenians, and second to continue the unfinished business of the 1930s repatriations by winning the battle against the “Armenian home” in Syria for once and all.

In 1946, 50,945 individuals (10,801 families) returned from Syria, Lebanon, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. In 1947, 35,401 individuals (8,521) families arrived from Syria and Lebanon, Greece, France, Egypt, Palestine, and the US.<sup>26</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Syria and Lebanon received greater attention from the very beginning. In fact, one-third of the overall repatriates (32,519 persons or 5,934 families out of the total 100,000) came from Syria and Lebanon. Thus, Syria and Lebanon were leading the list, followed by Iran (20,526), Greece (18,422), and Egypt (12,500).<sup>27</sup> Historian Ter Minassian has noted that 85% of the repatriates came from the Middle East and Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. For her, the special interest given to the region was dictated first of all by the external politics of

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<sup>23</sup> Mouradian, “L’immigration,” 82, fn. 26, 27, 28, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Siran Seza, “The Child of a Refugee” in *Meghavoruhin*. It is a story about a single mother in Beirut and how she decided to “repatriate.”

<sup>25</sup> Mouradian, “L’immigration,” fn. 47, 48.

<sup>26</sup> NAA, fond 362, list 27, 50, file 1, 7, 7. The report of 20 January 1948 provides a detailed breakdown of the numbers of Armenians arriving in 1946 and 1947 along with their origins.

<sup>27</sup> France (7,280), Bulgaria (5,352), Romania (2,866). Much smaller number of Armenians left from other Middle East countries too, Iraq (1,300), Palestine (1,200), USA (312), for details see Mouradian, “L’immigration,” 87.

the USSR.<sup>28</sup> As for historian Mouradian, this had to do with the fact that “these communities were the closest, the most regrouped, the poorest, the least assimilated, and thus, easier to influence and integrate. As such, they were preferable to the communities of the West.” Mouradian mentions that this had to do not only with Soviet politics and preference but also with Soviet needs; due to socio-economic conditions, Armenians of the Middle East were more willing to depart for Soviet Armenia.<sup>29</sup> In our opinion, this immigration pattern and the striking preference given to Syria and Lebanon and especially to the rural colonies in northern Syria has to be considered in the context of Soviet Armenia’s struggle against the threat of the “Armenian home.” Most of the attributes suggested by Mouradian, “the closest, the most regrouped, the least assimilated,” would, on the contrary, assure the legitimate homeland that these communities would last and not disappear quickly. But paradoxically they were the ones that the Soviet Armenian authorities sought to “rescue”... It was not because of the refugees needs but because of Soviet Armenia’s own agenda. The civil war in Greece, for example, did not make the refugees there a priority.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the Armenians of Syria and Lebanon were prioritized, even though most of them expressing interest did not meet the preferred criteria of the Soviet authorities. As reported by the Immigration of Committee of Syria and Lebanon to Yerevan, 90% of those who wished to repatriate were “needy” and required funding from diasporan organizations.<sup>31</sup> Laycock explains that, although the Soviet authorities did not intend to be charitable agents alleviating the suffering of the claimed “citizens;” instead wishing to gain a reliable cohort of workers for Soviet reconstruction efforts, nevertheless, in Syria, the priority was given to the unemployed and the “needy.”<sup>32</sup> How can this apparent goodwill of the Soviet authorities be explained? The answer becomes obvious when we study the propaganda campaign of the Soviet authorities in Syria and the pattern of who was expected to immigrate. In fact, the Armenian refugees of Syria were “wanted” regardless of their economic conditions. Moreover, the refugees from the Syrian Jazira were especially in demand.

Syria and Lebanon were among the first destinations visited by the Soviet Armenian representative Garnik Nazaryan. He arrived on March 12, 1946, quickly establishing a central

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<sup>28</sup> Ter Minassian, “La politique soviétique au Moyen-Orient et les minorités du début des années 20 jusqu’à la veille de la Guerre Froide” (Institut d’Etudes Politique de Paris, 1995), vol. 2:690.

<sup>29</sup> Mouradian, “L’immigration,” 86.

<sup>30</sup> Only 18,000 refugees were hosted from Greece. 5,100 in 1945; 13,322 in 1947, Mouradian, “L’immigr.,” 87.

<sup>31</sup> NAA fond 362, list 2, file 4, 17–20, cited in Laycock, “The Repatriation of Armenians,” fn, 62, 151.

<sup>32</sup> Ani Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 167; Laycock, “The Repatriation of Armenians,” 151.

committee composed of 11 persons headed by Hrant Devedjian<sup>33</sup> and regional committees in Aleppo, Damascus, and Jazira.<sup>34</sup> All these committees were headed by local influential persons, usually famous for their anti-ARF stances, who could influence thousands in their respective communities and convince them to leave.<sup>35</sup> The first group would leave Syria for Soviet Armenia on June 23 of the same year, merely three months after the arrival of Nazaryan.

In Syria, as elsewhere, the repatriation call had aroused great enthusiasm. For example, in Aleppo, 58,980 persons (9,830 families) were registered, in addition to 32,178 persons (5,363 families) in the Syrian Jazira and 91,158 persons (15,193 families) in the Aleppo countryside. These figures, given by *Geghard*, suggest that almost the entire Armenian population of Syria wished to leave for Armenia.<sup>36</sup> The Alepine *Al-Hawadis* (Incidents) cited *Al-Ahram* from Cairo, which reported that the Soviet Armenian representative had said that out of the 170,000 Armenian population of Syria and Lebanon, 135,000 had registered to leave. *Al-Hawadis* commented that the longing for the homeland had been the main reason for all these Armenians to depart because otherwise, they were connected to the brotherly Syrians by sincere friendship.<sup>37</sup>

The loss of a large number of Armenians from Syria and Lebanon did not only destabilize the Armenian communities of these countries but also the host communities. In Syria, in particular, the government and local authorities, lobbied against the exodus, fearing economic crises. They sent clear signals, messages, and gestures, hoping to prevent the Armenians from leaving. Nevertheless, between June and September 1946, eight groups left Beirut for Soviet Armenia, totaling 20,000 people. After the departure of the last group, the Syrian government made a last gesture to flatter the local Armenian leaders by decorating Archbishop Zareh, the Aleppo prelate, and Tohmuni, the vicar of Damascus, in an official ceremony as official recognition for the Armenian loyalty to the Syrian state.<sup>38</sup> The speech by the Aleppo governor, Mustafa Al-Shahabi, is particularly interesting. First of all, he referred to the Ittihadist dark ages when the Syrians and the Armenians had suffered together; then, he spoke in length about the present. How the Syrians had hoped the Armenians wished to live in

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<sup>33</sup> Hrand Devedjian was the editor of *Aravot* Communist paper, and the director of the Cultural Society between the Syrian Armenians and the USSR.

<sup>34</sup> HHA, fond 1, list 26, file 47, 65, Nazaryan's report to Grigor Arutyunov the First Secretary of the Communist Party, "The Repatriation Committees," Beirut, April 2, 1946.

<sup>35</sup> In Damascus it was headed by an influential merchant Hrant Grigorian. See in *ibid*, 188-189.

<sup>36</sup> Nakhgah Hay Azgayin Khorherdi, "Sovetakan Hayastan Nergaghtelu Hamar Ardzanagervatc Hayeri Tive" [The Number of Registered Armenians to Migrate to Soviet Armenia], *Geghard* (Aleppo, 1996), 166.

<sup>37</sup> According to the same paper, the figure for Palestine was 12,000 out of its 15,000 Armenian population. Ani Fishenkjan, "Mets Hayenadardzutyanyan Temayin Artsartsume Edjmiatsin Amsagri Ejerin" [The Discussion of the Great Repatriation in the Pages of Edjmiatsin newspaper] *Edjmiatsin*, N: 12 (2020) 145-155, 151.

<sup>38</sup> Cholakian, *Surihay Deptotsi Patmutyun*, vol.1: 216.

peace on Syrian lands to develop the country together (after all, was this not the Armenian message sent to the Syrians constantly?). The trajectory lived by Syrians and Armenians during these past 45 years had been full of struggle but also plenty of joyful moments. It was unfortunate to see that now the Armenians were leaving. Although the Syrians were happy for the Armenians who left for their *homeland*, they hoped that they would keep the memories of the *second homeland* alive'.<sup>39</sup>

Earlier, when Solod had informed the Syrian prime minister Sadallah al-Jabiri in May 1946 that the Armenians of Syria were to be transferred to Soviet Armenia in groups of 10,000 yearly, al-Jabiri was puzzled and concerned.<sup>40</sup> He told Hrach Papazian that he hoped the Armenians would reconsider their decision, Syria needed its Armenian population as never before, “especially now when the foreigners (French?) had departed.” Armenians could have an important impact on the development of Syria, while their departure meant that the handicraft trade would go down and many villages would remain empty. He also clarified that if the Armenians still insisted on leaving, the local authorities would facilitate their departure. Another outstanding issue was citizenship. Armenians were informed that they could not enjoy double citizenship. Their departure meant the end of their Syrian citizenship. “To avoid turning our newly created homeland into a tool in the hands of foreign diplomacy, those Armenians who wish to leave for Soviet Armenia have one month to arrange all their affairs.”<sup>41</sup> Other political leaders, too, feared that the departure of a great number of Armenians meant economic crises for Syria.<sup>42</sup> This message was also reported in the local Alepine papers.

Many Armenian national leaders had ambivalent attitudes towards the repatriation, too.<sup>43</sup> By the departure of thousands, the community was destabilized, and many national bodies had to be (re)created, and the delicate balances (re)arranged.<sup>44</sup> Paradoxically, the repatriation also meant strengthening ARF’s influence abroad. The reason behind it was simple; no prominent ARF members were permitted to leave, while others were obliged to denounce the

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<sup>39</sup> The archives of Aleppo prelicity, Political Council, vol. 59, 23 September 1946, cited in *Ibid*, 1:216. (Emphasized by the author).

<sup>40</sup> The archives of Aleppo prelicity, vol. 56, 6 July 1946, cited in Cholakian, *Suriahay Deptotsi*, 211.

<sup>41</sup> The archives of Aleppo prelicity, vol. 56, Minutes, 6 June 1946, cited in *ibid*, 212

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*. 213.

<sup>43</sup> The Catholicose of Cilicia instructed to national bodies to not interfere. Cholakian, *Suriahay Deptotsi*, 213.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

ARF.<sup>45</sup> Many of those leaving also had mixed feelings, especially the younger generation who had been born in Syria and Lebanon and considered it their only homeland.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, between 1946 and 1947, 32,519 Armenians left Syria and Lebanon for Soviet Armenia, out of which 6,347 persons (1,189 families) came from Aleppo, 1,602 persons (301 families) from the Upper Jazira, 463 persons (95 families) from Afrin, 100 families from Azez, 2,738 persons (446 families) from Kessab,<sup>47</sup> 359 persons (67 families) from Latakia, 2,598 persons (490 families) from Damascus.<sup>48</sup> Those Armenians leaving Aleppo in 1946 did so only after having visited the cemetery of Hanano and saying their farewell.<sup>49</sup>

The departure of thousands of Armenians had devastating effects everywhere, especially in Northern Syria, where the Armenian community life was destroyed, and Armenian schools shut down. Many villages stopped being “Armenian” villages. This was the case for Tell Brack, Jarablus, Afrin, Arab Bunar, Ayn al-Arus, Ayn Tina, Azez, Mumbuj, Bab, Deir ez-Zor, Jisr al-Shaghur, and certain neighborhoods in Aleppo such as Ashrafiye, Sheikh Maksud, Bostan pasha, Assyrian camp.<sup>50</sup> That Jazira contributed considerably to the numbers of the repatriates is also documented in the Armenian state archives, where it is mentioned in several instances that “Kurdish speaking Arabized Armenians who had settled in Syria from Sasun” arrived in large numbers.<sup>51</sup>

Ironically, just 10 years before the repatriation, the Armenian communities of Syrian Jazira had gained in numeric strength due to the Alexandretta crises. Many families had initially arrived in Aleppo but, because of poor economic conditions, had chosen Syrian Jazira instead.<sup>52</sup> Tell Brack was one such settlement where 30 Armenian families arrived, bringing with them a new Armenian spirit. Before their arrival, the twin villages of Tell Brack looked more Arabic and Kurdish than Armenian. Soon the village had a school, a scout troop, and a football club.

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<sup>45</sup> According to the memories of Melkon Eblighetian, an ARF deputy in the Lebanese parliament the denunciations were encouraged by the non-ARF forces rather than by the Soviet delegates. Melkon Eblighetian, *Gaghtakayanen Khorherdaran* [From Refugee Camp to Parliament] (Aleppo, 1998), 1: 95; Many Armenian neighborhoods stopped being “Armenian,” Cholakian, *Suriahay Deptotsi*, 1:217-220. On a similar process in Beirut, see in T. Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora: Making Lebanon Their Own* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> See the poem of a young Syrian Armenian Armen Petirian as a farewell to Aleppo, “I was born here, remain prosperous Aleppo, I have eaten your bread and salt, remain prosperous – birthplace” [Hin tsnatc em, aha k’ertam, dun shen mnas Halep kaghak, aghed u hatsed yes shat kera, du shen mans, tsndavayr], cited in Fishenkjian, “Mets Hayenadardzutyun,” 155. I am grateful to Ani Fishenkjian for pointing out this source.

<sup>47</sup> Details on Kessab, see Hakob Cholakian, *Kessab* (Aleppo 1995), 1:135-138.

<sup>48</sup> Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 169-170, S. Ghazarian, *Haykakan Poker Gaghutner: Azez, Afrin, Arab Bunar* [Armenian Small Colonies: Azez, Afrin, Arab Bunar] (Beirut, 1965).

<sup>49</sup> *Yeprat*, November 21, 1946 cited in Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Hakob Cholakian, *Suriahay Deptotsi* Patmutyun, 218.

<sup>51</sup> HAA, fond 362, list 2, file 4, 5, 58, 85; cited in Norik Sargsyan, *Spyurkahayeri 1946-1948 Mets Hayenadardzutyune* [The Great Repatriation of the Diaspora Armenians, 1946-1948] (Yerevan, 2014), 77.

<sup>52</sup> Hakob Jeghelian, *Stverum Mnacac Kyank* [A Life Left in Shadow] (Yerevan: Hayastan, 1991), 6-7.

It was said that the scout troop made a profound impression on the Syrian tribes, who believed that the Armenians were trained in military arts.<sup>53</sup> Tell Brack was then a prosperous settlement, and its inhabitants had many plans to make the lives of their villagers better. One such plan was the construction of the famous dam.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout World War II, the mood in Tell Brack had been depressed; people were waiting impatiently for the outcome of the conflict. Thousands of Armenians were fighting in the USSR's army, which meant new destruction and loss. When the news of the USSR's victory (thus also the victory of Soviet Armenia) arrived, grand festivities were organized. When, shortly after, the news of the repatriation arrived, the widespread euphoria reached its climax – the *victorious homeland* was calling its people home.<sup>55</sup> Parnak Shishekian (Arabic name Ahmad al-Jezza)<sup>56</sup> the mudir and the founder of Tell Brack invited the notables to an important consultation. He declared.

If I was offered to go to heaven, I would certainly refuse it. But the call of the homeland is different; it is a historic and sacred duty. A nation gathering after all the misfortunes that we have seen... is a miracle. We have collected many Armenian orphans, kept them away from Arabization and Turkification, and are trying to keep them Armenians. But what would happen after us? They might leave for elsewhere... anyway, a foreign land cannot keep the nation alive. While homeland is an eternal parent (*hayreni hoghe havitenakan tsnogh e*). We must all leave, in an organized way, and participate in the reconstruction of our homeland, to cure her wounds, so that our children live in the sacred homeland with pride and dignity.<sup>57</sup>

The homeland was calling. The entire village, 2,000 persons, unanimously decided to leave. The delegates from Soviet Armenia arrived at Tell Brack to start the registration for the entire region. For Parnak, who had liberated many Armenian orphans, it meant realizing the ultimate goal – bringing them to the final destination – homeland. He was not concerned about leaving behind all his wealth. He only asked the Soviet Armenian delegates if he could take his two Arabic horses. Parnak and the entire population of Tell Brack, along with many Kurdish and Arabic-speaking Armenians of the Syrian Jazira, and as the horses, arrived in Soviet Armenia in 1947. They were resettled in Mergashat, near Edzmiatsin.<sup>58</sup>

As a result of this massive repatriation, the Armenian communities of the Syrian Jazira suffered considerably but were not entirely emptied of their Armenian population. For unforeseen reasons, no repatriation took place from Syria in 1948 even though, in December

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>55</sup> Description of the scene see in Jeghelian, *Sverum Mnacac Kyank*, 52-53.

<sup>56</sup> More about him see Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Jeghelian, *Sverum Mnacac Kyank*, 52-53.

<sup>58</sup> All his family members have migrated to the USA. The house where Parnak used to live is a museum today.



1947, Soviet authorities had decided to authorize the arrival of another 15,000 persons, out of which 5,000 were from Syria and Lebanon.<sup>59</sup> No departure would be possible for the Armenians of Syria and Lebanon in the coming years either.<sup>60</sup>

In vain, the Central Immigration Committee of Syria and Lebanon sent a letter in June 1948 to Yerevan asking for at least 40,000 places specifically for Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Cyprus for that year. It even suggested the breakdown per region: 6,000 for the Upper Jazira, 13,000 Aleppo, 500 Kessab, 1,000 Damascus, 12,000 Beirut, 500 Palestine, and 1,000 Cyprus.<sup>61</sup> Tellingly, the largest group was attributed to Aleppo and the Syrian Jazira. Moreover, the Committee reminded the Soviet authorities that as many as 144,299 persons had been registered since the beginning of the repatriation. After the departure of 31,000, 102,000 still awaited their turn. Thousands of refugees from Jazira who had already sold all their belongings waited in vain in Aleppo and Beirut to depart in 1948. Stalin's political priorities had shifted in the meantime, and Armenian repatriates were no longer needed.

By that time, it must be said that the enthusiasm of the Armenians had considerably diminished, too, given the announcement of the Soviet leaders in October 1947 that the claimed territories of Kars and Ardahan were for the Republic of Georgia and not for Armenia. Stalin's interest in the Armenians and their repatriation had vanished. Moreover, most of the repatriates would be deported to Siberia, labeled as spies, or executed in 1949.<sup>62</sup> After all, the repatriation had not been done for the sake of the Armenians!

The repatriation was halted. Some of the Armenians from Jazira stranded in the cities eventually returned to their former farms as laborers instead of owners; others chose to remain in the cities. For all of them, it meant starting a new life all over again. The euphoria of *nationalism* and *homeland* had erased all their efforts over the past 25 years. According to the Syrian-Armenian historian Ani Fishenkjian, the Syrian authorities were happy that emigration from Syria had been halted since they had feared economic crises.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ani Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 170; Meliksetyan, *Hayrenik-Spyurk Arenchutyunnere ev Hayrenadardyutyune*, [Homeland-Diaspora Relations and Repatriations] (Yerevan, 1985), 236.

<sup>60</sup> In 1948, the majority, 10,000 persons came from Egypt, see in Mouradian, "L'immigration," 87.

<sup>61</sup> HAA, fond 362, list 2, file 41, 37-39 in A.V. Aleksanyan M.S. Tumanyan "Hayrenadardzutyun Ejerits, 1946-48: Pastaghter" [Documents on the Repatriation, 1946-48], *Banber Hayastani Arkhivneri*, N:2 (Yerevan, 1963), 79, also Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 171.

<sup>62</sup> They were accused for either being ARF members or served in the Légion, A. Kundakjan, *Hayrenadardzneri Bernajenshunnere Stalinyan Jamanakashrjanum* [The Repressions Against the Repatriates during the Stalin's Era] (Yerevan, 2010); A. Manukyan, *Kaghakan Brnajshunnere Hayastanum 1920-1953* [Political Repressions in Armenia, 1920-1953] (Yerevan, 1999); George Mamulia, "Les premières fissures de l'URSS d'après guerre: le cas de la Géorgie et du Caucase du Sud, 1946-56," *Cahiers du monde russe*, 46:3 (2005), 593-616.

<sup>63</sup> Artificial administrative difficulties were created to hinder mass immigration, A. Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 171, 177, For the same process in the 1960s see HHA, fond 326, list 2, file 75, 35.

Some of these registered Armenians, especially those from the Syrian Jazira, would eventually leave for Soviet Armenia in the 1960s in the second round of immigration when the Soviet Armenian authorities specifically targeted Syria and the Syrian Jazira. Soviet Armenia opened its consulate in Aleppo and, between 1964 and 1966, organized the repatriation of another 25,000 Armenians.<sup>64</sup> Among them were 7,000 Armenians from the 30 Armenian villages of the Syrian Jazira and 50 families from Hassake.<sup>65</sup>

Notably, this time too, Syrian local authorities tried their best to convince the Armenians not to leave. The most active organizers were invited to the local police stations for interrogation.<sup>66</sup> Aleppo's high-ranking officials, including the governor Mamdul Zubiy expressed their concerns.<sup>67</sup> Zubiy's message to the Armenians of Aleppo was quite telling, too, "Syrians regretted to see Armenians departing, but they had to facilitate their departure for they were leaving for their homeland, where their sisters and brothers lived." He hoped that Armenians would not forget their Syrian homeland, where they had lived for many years, would help Syrians support the struggle of the Palestinians, and help forge friendly relations between Syria and the USSR.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Armenians of Syria were expected to serve as a living bridge to improve relations between Syria and the USSR.

As for the Soviet Armenian authorities, this time, they were determined to empty Jazira of its Armenian population. This was clearly explained by Pehlavenian, an official in the USSR's Syrian embassy, "It is desirable that the Armenians from the urban sites abstain from immigrating... by transferring 1,500 Armenian peasant families to Soviet Armenia, there would be no peasant Armenians left in Syria."<sup>69</sup>

Did the Soviet Armenian authorities intend to have no Armenian peasant population in Syria, or did they wish to remove all the Armenians from the Syrian Jazira? The archival sources remain silent. The removal, however, was almost complete. Except for Qamishli,<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> A. Badalyan, "Halepum USSR Gelkavor Hyupatosutyany Teghekançe Halepahay Hamaynki Masin," *Banber Hayastani Arkhivneri*, N: 2 (Yerevan 2009), 221, cited in Ani Fishenkjian, *Surio Hay Hamaynki*, 176.

<sup>65</sup> This time, too, as previously Soviet authorities responsible for repatriation paid a particular attention to the Armenian colonies specially Qamishli, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Ibid, 177, 179.

<sup>66</sup> "Are your living conditions bad in Syria?" "Do you have any concerns?" "Why do you wish to leave?" such were the questions asked to mukhtar Karapet Hakobian, the head of Ras al-Ayn by the kamaykam, HAA, fond 326, list 2, file 75, 23-24. The conversation between Soviet Armenia's representative for immigration in Aleppo N. Gasparov and mukhtar Karapet Hakobian, Aleppo, September 21, 1964, cited in Fichenkjian, "Siriahayeri Nergakhte Khoherdayin Hayastan, 1960s," *Banber Hayastani Arkhivneri*, N: 2 (2003), 131-142, 134-135.

<sup>67</sup> Syrian authorities had initially introduced some restrictions to not allow any massive immigration. It was after the visit of a high-ranking Armenian delegation headed by the prelate to the Ministry of the Interior in September 1964, and similar interventions done by the Soviet diplomats that these measures were lifted. Ibid, 141-142.

<sup>68</sup> As reported by Movses Salatian to Zubnow, the Soviet Consule in Damascus, Ibid, 137.

<sup>69</sup> HAA, fond 326, list 1, file 378, 8-10, G.A. Pehlavenian, USSR's embassy of Syria to the deputy head of the Ministers' Council of Armenia, Aleppo, September 21, 1965, in Fishenkjian, "Siriahayeri Nergakhte," 142.

<sup>70</sup> In 1945, Qamishli had 9,700 Armenians and 7,624 in 1946, H. Cholakian, *Suriahay Deptotsi*, 2:270-271.

which managed to have a more or less stable Armenian population even after the repatriation thanks to the fact that those who did not leave the villages eventually moved there, most Armenian settlements in Jazira lost their Armenian population. Among them were Darbassiye, Amuda, Deir ez-Zor, Ayn Tina, Arab Punar (Kobane), Tel Abyad, Ayn Arus, Afrin, Tell Samen, Tell Armen, Sharb Petros, Azez, Meydan Ekbez, Rajo, Hamam, Gotmo and many others.<sup>71</sup> The few (Jishr al-Shaghur, Ras al-Ayn, Qamishli, and Hassake) that managed to survive against all odds, lost their last Armenian populations after 2015 when the region witnessed intense fighting. The last Armenians, along with Christian and other communities, left the region, spreading once again all over the world. One hundred years later, the destruction of the “mother colony” (*mayr gaghut*) was complete.

Armenians of Syria had to choose to remain or leave for their *real homeland*. Why did they choose to leave at the precise moment when their efforts of two decades were bearing fruit? Was it the uncertain social and political conditions following the withdrawal of the French forces and the proclamation of Syrian independence that made repatriation to Soviet Armenia so appealing, as argued by Laycock?<sup>72</sup> This does not appear to be the case. As seen in the last chapters Armenian neighborhoods were finally ready in both Syria and Lebanon, while rural colonies strived. As of 1945, 30 other small rural colonies had emerged in the Syrian Jazira, thanks to the arrival of Armenians from Balu and Baghesh as well as Catholic Armenians from Mardin.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Jazira had gained new Armenian settlers after the ceding of the Alexandretta. Moreover, the Armenians had managed to successfully transition from “bad refugees to good refugees,” in the words of Seda Altuğ.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the lives of the Armenian community, like those of the Syrians, were plagued by numerous coup d'états after the country's independence. The rural colonies, in particular, were severely impacted, resulting in the departure of many people to the urban centers. The claims that the Armenians left the Syrian Jazira because the French military had left the region are inaccurate. Moreover, most of

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<sup>71</sup> Darbasiye had 230 Armenians in 1945, all Armenians left for Soviet Armenia in 1965, Amuda lost its Armenian population in 1947 and the last remaining families in 1960s, Deir ez-Zor had 625 Armenian families in 1943, most left for Soviet Armenia; 90 percent of Armenians from Ayn Tina left for Soviet Armenia; Arab Punar counted for 1232 Armenians in 1944, most left for Soviet Armenia in 1947 after which it was repopulated by the Kurds; Tel Abyad had 412 Armenians in 1943 most left for Soviet Armenia; Ayn Arus had 266 Armenians in 1944, most of them left for Soviet Armenia; Afrin had 620 Armenians in 1943, they left for Soviet Armenia first in 1946-47, then in the 1960s. Ibid, 205-259.

<sup>72</sup> Laycock, “The Repatriation of Armenians,” 151.

<sup>73</sup> Hakob Cholakian, *Surihay Deprotsi*, 1: 67.

<sup>74</sup> Seda Altuğ, “Making of Refugee-ness,” 173.

these settlements had quite stable Armenian populations even after the French withdrawal, as documented by Syrian-Armenian historian Fishenkjian.<sup>75</sup>

To be clear, the post-WWII Syrian reality was difficult for many reasons: the Arab-Israeli war and Syria's defeat in 1948, as well as economic problems and political upheavals in Syria, created especially challenging conditions for the small rural Armenian communities.<sup>76</sup> Many people preferred to migrate to the urban centers and Lebanon.<sup>77</sup> These political upheavals affected the Armenian community because not only were the activities of the Armenian political parties forbidden but many Armenian schools and press organs were shut down.<sup>78</sup>

The Armenian community of Syria was abruptly uprooted on a *voluntary basis* to emigrate to Soviet Armenia right after Syria's independence because, although they had successfully avoided two traps that threatened to ensnare them (the French colonial and the Syrian nationalist), they failed to escape the third trap. "Soviet Armenia has decided to save the world-spread Armenians from assimilation... The homeland has opened its doors for us... the dream of all the Armenians to live in their own homeland... to create, work and die in the homeland."<sup>79</sup>

Later, communist historian Abrahamyan when writing about the repatriations claimed that the hostile local environment was the main reason that many Armenian refugees moved to Soviet Armenia. Moreover, for him, "the mere existence of Soviet Armenia embodied the salvation, the paradise" (*erkir draxtavayr*).<sup>80</sup> Abrahamyan naturally said nothing about the fact that, at times the hostile polemic against the Armenian refugees was incited by none other than the Soviet authorities.

As a result of the repatriations of 1946–1948, more than 100,000 Armenians from all over the world arrived in Soviet Armenia, the bulk of whom came from Syria and Lebanon. All the scholars and observers agree that the impact of this particular repatriation was massive, not only on the Armenian colonies that lost thousands of members but especially on Soviet Armenia. The latter emerged as the *authentic* and only legitimate homeland for *all* the

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<sup>75</sup> For figures which are those of the Armenian prelicity of Aleppo, see Fishenkjian, *Siriayi Hay Hamaynki*, 86, 94–99.

<sup>76</sup> More on this period see Hayk Samsonyan, "Banaki Dere Siriayi Kaghakan Kyankum, Razmakan Heghashrjumneri Fenomene" [The Role of the Army in the Syrian Political Life, the Phenomenon of the *Cout d'état*] (Unpublished diss., Yerevan State University, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Fishenkjian, *Hushamatyan Suriyahay Ognutyun Khachi, 1919-2009* (Aleppo, 2010), 143, 155, 186, 194; A. Fishenkjian, *Siriayi Hay Hamaynki*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Najarian, "Hay-Arabakan," 319–321.

<sup>79</sup> Kharip, "Batc Namak, Gots Metkov."

<sup>80</sup> HAA, fond 362, list 2, file 9, 60 in Norik Sargsyan, *Spyurkahayeri 1946-1948 Mets Hayernadardzutyune* [The Great Repatriation of the Diaspora Armenians, 1946–1948] (Yerevan, 2014), 25.

Armenians.<sup>81</sup> Throughout the pages of this dissertation, we have aimed to show that the acquisition of this new status was primarily due to Soviet Armenia's successful battle against its most "dangerous" competitor – the Syrian Jazira and the shadow of the Armenian "national home" there.

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<sup>81</sup> Sossie Kasbarian, "Refuge in the 'Homeland,'" 167; Pattie, "Longing and Belonging," Laycock, "Armenian homelands," Mouradian, "L'immigration des arméniens."



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## Annexes



An image from the Aleppo refugee camp in the 1920s shows makeshift houses made of mud bricks, tin cans, wooden crates, and canvas. The "housing famine" made obtaining housing a major issue that Jeppe sought to solve with the construction of a new compound in Maydan outside the city center (Source: The Karen Jeppe Archives, Gylling, Denmark. Courtesy of Mihran Minassian).

Figure 17. the Armenian refugee camp in Aleppo. Source: *Houshamadyan*



*Damascus, Khcher's Camp. A group of refugees who settled down in the camp in the 1920s. In the background is their old tent and next to it, their new home.*

Figure 18. Armenian refugees in Damascus. Source: *Houshamadyan*



Figure 19.  
Needle work.  
Source  
Derunian,  
*Suriakan  
Album*, 53.

Տիկ. Սեմա Եր-Ղազարեան իր սանձուկ էն

Working under the watchful eyes of Sema Der-Ghazarian.



Figure 20.  
The shoe makers.  
Source  
Derunian,  
*Suriakan  
Album*, 62.

Մարաշիներու թխք. Սանալնի կամարին  
արհեստանոցը, բոլորն աշակերտներով:

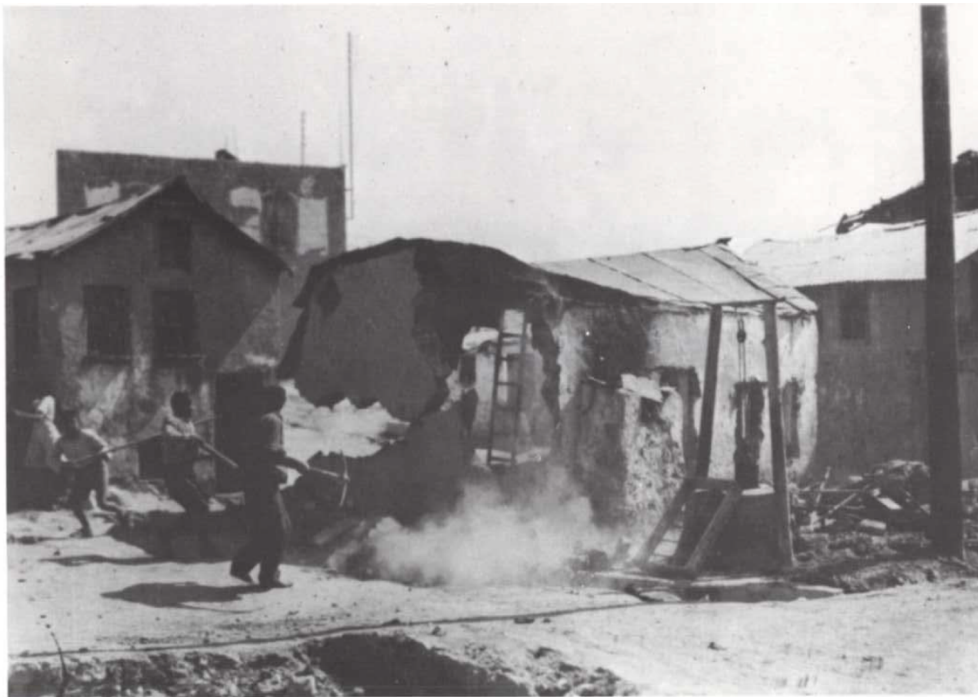
We of Marash make good sandals but  
we cannot afford to wear them.



Դարակ ննրուք բնակիչները...

The shelf dwellers...

Figure 21. Kilikian School in Aleppo camp, 1940. Source Derunian, *Suriakan Albom*, 71.



Կը քանդուիին հին հիւանդանոցը, նոր տուններ կանգնեցուցաւ համարը:

Figure 22.  
Destruction of  
the shelters  
to be replaced  
by proper  
buildings.

Source  
Derunian,  
*Suriakan  
Albom*, 78.



Վերակառուցված Հիւստանի ընդհանուր տեսքը - 1936. General view of the reconstructed Armenian Refugee Camp in Meidan - 1936.  
Կենտրոնը՝ Սուրբ Գրիգոր Լուսավորիչի Եկեղեցին։ In the center, the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator.

Figure 23. The newly constructed Nor Gyugh in Aleppo, 1936, Source Derunian, *Suriakan Albom*, 78.