Arab Reform Initiative

Armenians Abroad: Between Diaspora and the State

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The history of Armenian migration, which can be traced back as early as the fourth century, has been largely marked by the division of the Armenian nation, the necessity of choosing between conviction and persecution, and the tension between cultural heritage and assimilation. The first Armenian diaspora can arguably be detected at the establishment of Christianity as the Armenian state religion. Under Gregory the Illuminator (c. 257 – c. 331), Armenians were forced to choose between converting to Christianity or persecution – a scenario which would repeat itself a century later under the influence of Mesrob Mashdots, best known for developing the Armenian alphabet.[1] These events would create a religious divide within the country that would contribute to later discord among Armenians. Mass migration, for its part, began in earnest with the fall of the Bagratid Kingdom in Central Armenia in the 11thcentury. Just over a century later, the decline of the Cilician Kingdom, originally established by Armenian refugees, led to new waves of migration, which would create further divides. These rifts date back to the 1440s when the Catholicosate, the administrative centre of the Armenian Church, was moved back to its original location of Echmiadzin in Eastern Armenia. With the establishment of a new patriarchate in 1463 in Constantinople, the power of Echmiadzin was limited, resulting in a division between Armenians largely in the territory of the former Cilician Kingdom, who endeavoured to reshape their culture, and those in other areas who chose to assimilate.

The eventual decline of the Cilician Kingdom allowed the Armenian Highland to fall under rival regional powers, most notably the Ottoman Turks and the Persian Safavids. The two empires divided the Highland into the Turkish Western Armenia and the Persian Eastern Armenia. This separation endured for more than two-and-a-half centuries, until Tsarist Russia occupied the majority of Eastern Armenia, which was referred to as "Russian Armenia" in the early 19thcentury. This geographic division of Armenia resulted in a lack of social coherence in the Armenian nation, thereby fostering other divisions related to lifestyle, culture, mindset, and language.[2] In this sense, the geographic separation of Armenia reinforced the 15thcentury religious divide, which was in turn further exacerbated by newly developed linguistic differences.

The onset of the Industrial Revolution and advent of modern ideas of statehood and nationalism further divided Armenians. Dating back to the early 17thcentury,

the forced displacement of thousands of Armenians from the Eastern Armenian Araratian plain and Nakhichevan to Isphahan, in modern day Iran, led to the creation of Armenian settlements within and beyond the Persian borders. Unlike the previous waves of migrants who were largely Christians, these immigrants and their elites, or tradesmen, prioritized ethnicity and patriotism. Parallel to these secular elites, a Catholic Armenian religious congregation was established in Venice, Italy in the late 17thcentury. Both groups shared a common concern: Armenian statehood. However, the secular figures strove for an independent Armenia with the support of Christian states, while the Catholic clerics aimed to enlighten and educate the Armenians. Nonetheless, both groups were influenced by the ideas of statehood and patriotism as well as Armenian identity. These tools would later be used by members of the diasporic elite to preserve Armenian heritage and identity.[3]

1. Constructing an Armenian Space in the Post-Genocide Period: The Modern Armenian Diaspora (1920-1991)

The period between 1920 and 1991 was a pivotal moment for the Armenian diaspora. In a span of just over seventy years the modern diaspora took shape as the result of forced displacement and genocide. The modern diaspora was initially formed in various Middle Eastern countries by Armenian refugees who confronted daily challenges to their security and livelihoods. These refugees had to adjust to unfamiliar environments, earn a living, integrate into their host society and stay connected to their Armenian pasts. They also continued to politically oppose the Turks but had to be mindful of not making claims that would offend their host countries. And while refugees encountered similar challenges throughout the Middle East, they adopted different strategies based on the political policies of their host country and evolutions in world affairs that influenced Armenian relations.

This period was also influential in forming a new identity of the Armenian diaspora scattered throughout the Middle East. This identity was rooted in the forced displacement, deportation, and genocide[4] the Armenians experienced during

World War I (WWI) and centred on the idea that Armenian identity could only be preserved through opposing Turkey. The genocide, in particular, challenged the pre-existing Armenian identity. Following WWI, Armenians began to consider their religion, language, culture, and political rights as the root causes of the genocide. These notions, in addition to the pre-genocide dream of statehood, became the defining features of the Armenian diaspora dream of statehood, became the defining features of the Armenian diaspora, who shared the same feelings towards Turkey and promoted the same national agenda.

Unsurprisingly, anti-Turkish sentiments were also prominent among the inhabitants of the easternmost areas of the Armenian Highland, which was influential in the development of a new diaspora identity. In 1918, Russian Armenia, along with refugees from the Turkish Western Armenia, fought against the Turkish army. After a short-lived independence, they were reincorporated in 1920 into the Russian state. Thus, both Eastern and Western Armenians were affected by the Turkish presence in this area. The shared anti-Turkish sentiments united the diaspora and the Armenian state. In fact, the relationship between the diaspora and the state has played a significant role in shaping the diaspora identity.

Anti-Turkish sentiments and the experience of the genocide obliterated divisions among Armenians[5] and were influential factors in the development of a new Armenian identity through the creation a common enemy, the Turk. However, with the establishment of the Soviet Union, the Armenians were confronted with new divisive issues. Soviet Armenia became a strong point of contention between the diaspora and Soviet Armenians as well as within the diaspora itself. As early as the 1920s the geographic divide between Western Armenians and the Sovietized Eastern Armenians was exacerbated by an ideological divide and Stalin's Iron Curtain. The refugees in Soviet Armenia struggled to earn a living and were forced to choose between a weak pseudo-state under Soviet rule that was also antagonized by the Western mandatory powers and an occupied ancestral land, Western Armenia.

Soviet Eastern Armenia also struggled politically. The East lacked an independent foreign policy and was incapable of constructing an Armenian space in refugee camps throughout the Middle East. The Armenian Church, political parties, and

elite intellectuals were powerless and unable to assist as they had already lost their influence. And at this time, Armenian civil society was at its weakest. However, foreign relief aid, Armenian relief organizations, and Armenian compatriotic unions were influential in filling the gap of the struggling state and providing for the refugees living in destitution.

European and American missionary and philanthropic organizations played a significant role in delivering foreign aid. Their contributions focused on the care of the large number of orphans as well as managing orphanages and public health centres. At the same time the British and French mandatory powers implemented the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, allowing Armenian refugees throughout the Middle East to become naturalized citizens of their host countries. The process of naturalization was the first step towards political integration of former refugees.Additionally,the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) was founded in 1906 in Cairo and became an influential relief organization. This organization was instrumental in mobilizing the pre-genocide Armenian diaspora to come to the aid of their fellow citizens. With its broad network, which extended as far as the USA and Singapore, the AGBU became the prominent Armenian actor for relief work. The AGBU and other Armenian philanthropic organizations continue to have a major role in the RA today. In addition to relief organizations, compatriotic unions were also revitalized at the end of WWI. This was done through the initiatives of Armenian migrants in Europe and the United States who bought plots of land that were distributed among Armenians to maintain community life. The distribution of these plots enabled the construction of courts, churches, and schools.

The renewed interest in Armenian affairs in the diaspora was brought about by the establishment of relief and compatriotic organizations. As a result, the remnants of the Armenian educated elite and party activists began contributing to these causes and formed their own agendas. Gradually, the parties' influence increased and overtook the church and the compatriotic unions. Party activists were instrumental in broadening the Armenian refugees' public sphere by initiating youth, sports, cultural, dance, theatre, choir, scout, and volunteer programmes. This resulted in a sense of unity among members of the diaspora, including refugee communities. In the absence of a strong host country the Armenian public

sphere took on the superficial attributes of a "balloon" pseudo state, meaning that the parties profited from the Armenian refugees who turned into their clients.[6]

Capitalizing on the refugees was possible because the Armenian diaspora was detached from both the weak communitarian host country and Soviet Armenia, which had excluded itself due to the Stalinist purges and the brutal oppression of Soviet Armenian nationalists. The exile of large numbers of Armenians after their repatriation to Soviet Armenia between 1946 and 1948 further reduced the connectftness of the Armenian diaspora to Soviet Armenia and encapsulated the diaspora ghettos of the Middle East. Moreover, the ideological divide of the Cold War introduced an international factor to the widening divides between the diaspora and Soviet Armenia.[7]

The 50thanniversary of the Armenian Genocide, however, marked a turning point for both the Soviet Armenians and the diaspora of the mid-1960s. At this time, the two groups were less preoccupied with the demands of everyday life and they questioned the effectiveness of diaspora party policies concerning the resolution of the Armenian Cause. Their Soviet-Armenian counterparts raised similar concerns with their local Soviet government. This generation of the diaspora also challenged the issue of identity,[8] feeling the ambivalence and duality of their existence.[9] While the discourse of the time claimed one could hold a single exclusivist identity, this generation was dubious of its own identity. They were neither fully Armenian nor full-fledged citizens of their host countries.

As the Cold War trends regressed and the Soviet Union was forced to confront the death of Stalin, the establishment of the Committee for Cultural Relations with the Armenian diaspora in 1964 signalled a formal attempt to reconnect the Soviet and Armenian diasporas. The inauguration of the genocide monument in the Soviet Armenian capital further warmed the nationalist feelings of the Armenian diaspora towards Soviet Armenia, as it was believed that Soviet Armenia was more nationalist than Soviet. Gradually, Soviet Armenia's renowned cultural figures, sports teams, and dance ensembles became known to the diaspora. The rapprochement between the diaspora and Soviet Armenia continued as students from the diaspora had the opportunity to study in Soviet Armenian universities for free, diaspora school teachers attended intensive summer courses, teenagers were offered summer excursions, writers participated in the Soviet Armenian writers'

conventions, and Armenian textbooks were provided to diaspora schools. Though this might have been pure Soviet propaganda, Armenian nationalism and unity were stronger than ever.

By the mid-1970s, the diaspora, Soviet Armenia, and the entire Armenian territory in general, was encapsulated by a broad network of cultural, religious, and party channels.[10] Regional and transnational athletic events, cultural gatherings, and party conventions included members and figures from all parts of the diaspora. Until the mid-1970s, the Armenian diaspora communities in the Middle East were considered successful. However, two events jeopardized this prosperity, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the Iranian Revolution (1979). However, by the late 1980s the demographic importance of the diaspora had shifted from the Middle East to the West, which had been flourishing financially since the 1950s. By the end of the Soviet era, the significance of the Western Armenian diaspora was well established. Nonetheless, future developments would continue to influence the diaspora's identity.

2. Constructing a Globalized Armenian Space: The Post-Modern Modern Armenian Diaspora (1991-2015)

In 1991, Armenia declared its independence. The realities of the new state challenged the decades-old rhetoric of Armenian patriotism, repatriation, and superiority[11] and hundreds of thousands of Soviet Armenians actually chose to leave the country.[12] However, an earthquake in 1988 and the violent conflict of Karabagh, an autonomous Armenian region within Azerbaijan, proved to be the first challenges to Armenia's independence. Today the earthquake is a distant memory and the Armenians have self-declared statehood in Karabagh; however, families remain displaced in the earthquake-stricken zone and there are almost daily casualties on the eastern borders of Karabagh. Nonetheless, the Karabagh victory increased the morale of the Armenians worldwide and offset the failures of the newly formed state.

Armenian independence also influenced the diaspora identity. The outflow of a

million Armenians from the newly independent state transformed the Armenian diaspora's construction and ideologies. The diaspora was defined as the result of the Turkish genocide; however, the new members did not come from the Ottoman Empire. Another key difference was that while old members had been forced to flee their country, new members had willingly chosen to leave. These stark differences presented a challenge to diaspora discourse and identity. This shift in the diaspora, however, was not addressed as the earthquake, independence, and the Karabagh conflict turned the attention of the Armenian diaspora from growing local needs[13] to the larger needs of the fatherland. In addition to the pre-existing matters of identity, the desire to return, shortcomings of the Armenian state-building, as well as the on-going issues surrounding the Karabagh conflict and the earthquake, the Iraqi Armenian exodus and the current Syrian Armenian crisis contributed to Armenian uncertainties and prevented activists from prioritizing essential issues. Additionally, questions such as the Armenian Cause, Turkish-Armenian relations, and similar critical issues were not properly defined. Moreover, strengthening the relations between Armenian statehood and population outflow as well as assimilation and preservation of Armenian identity were never fully examined. Perhaps the most significant issues that were neglected were the questions of reintroducing the unorthodox young generations of the diaspora to the Armenian state and integrating the ex-Soviet Armenian migrants into the diaspora.

The lack of discourse surrounding certain issues resulted in a largely disoriented and disinterested Armenian diaspora, though some interest was renewed by the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Nonetheless, a sense of panic prevailed as Armenia continued to experience large scale desertions from both the RA, in the form of migration, and the diaspora, in the form of assimilation. The smaller diaspora outposts established in the 1920s were dissolving into their host communities and slowly disappearing. It seemed that integration, even in the diaspora communities throughout the Middle East, was becoming the norm. Proof of integration into host communities is demonstrated by the rate of mixed marriages exceeding 50%, a decline in enrolment in Armenian schools, and the addition of Western Armenian to the UN list of endangered languages. Diaspora members justified their assimilation into host societies by citing the failures of the Armenian state in addressing the crises of impoverishment and oligarchy in the

country. In turn, these failures shattered the patriotic dreams of the Armenian diaspora.

Following independence, the RA made efforts to repair their relationship with the Armenian diaspora. Among the first steps taken to consolidate the connection between the RA and the diaspora was the establishment of the Hayasdan All-Armenian fund in 1992 which supported the development of infrastructure inside the RA. However, when this proved to be unsuccessful, Armenians in the diaspora were offered Armenian citizenship. Soon after, the Ministry of Diaspora was established, which has since become the most active state institution in incorporating the diaspora into the affairs of the RA.

The Ministry of Diaspora has played an influential role in organizing pan-Armenian conventions, professional gatherings, exhibitions, jubilees, and celebrations of Armenian cultural heritage. Some events specifically addressed issues separating the diaspora from their home country and promoted, for example, the endangered Western Armenian language or the international recognition of the Armenian genocide. The Ministry promoted and encouraged the various activities, institutions, organizations, and societies of the diaspora communities and recognized the achievements of diaspora educators, philanthropists, scholars, writers, professionals, and activists. Additionally, the Ministry has made knowledge about Armenia readily available through creating numerous websites and encouraging state institutions to be transparent and to proactively engage with the diaspora. In fact, the Armenian state has taken concrete steps to obliterate the divisive fault lines between the RA and the diaspora.[14] The state attempted to increase nationalism among the diaspora through demonstrating the military strength of the country, citing its victory in the Karabagh conflict, as well as raising awareness about the Armenian genocide. However, despite the Armenian state's efforts, the high expectations of the diaspora have left them disappointed.

In response to the disappointment surrounding the state's action, the diaspora enacted their own initiatives to strengthen links to their home country. Directly following Armenian independence, the diaspora was quick to announce its support for the new republic.[15] They organized conventions in Armenia as well as excursions, sports events, history tours, exhibitions, and cultural events on the

local level. In fact, it is rare to come across any diaspora organizations, parties, unions, societies, volunteers, or scout groups that have not convened at least once in Armenia. These events have renewed the interest of many diaspora members that had lost touch with their homeland.

Conclusion

Institutional divisions within the Armenian Church, exacerbated by historical divisions, have generated cultural and linguistic divisions that aided the development of the modern-day Armenian diaspora's identity. The influence of the genocide and political developments, such as the Cold War, also incited division among Armenians and the transformation of their identity. Indeed, the question of identity must be understood within the context of characteristics of the host country, such as the weak state, tolerance, and communitarianism, as well as variables within the Armenian community itself, for example density, coherence, and institutional presence. These factors have enabled the Armenian diaspora communities to preserve and strengthen their identity, buttressed by the initiatives of both the Armenian state and the diaspora to rebuild the fragmented relationship between the two.

The Armenian diaspora has a long and at times complicated history, and the modern-day diaspora continues this tradition as it is both fractured and strongly connected at the same time. Historical rifts as well as disillusionment with the Armenian state continue to divide the diaspora today; however, technology and initiatives on the part of both the Armenian government and the diaspora have endeavoured to address the diaspora's concerns. Technology has played a significant role as it has made information about Armenian history and culture readily available, inspiring many diaspora groups to engage with their heritage through various activities, including trips to Armenia. Armenian volunteer organizations and an increased awareness of Armenian history could both revive dormant factors of Armenian identity and encourage Armenian diaspora members to reconnect with their cultural background and establish their own identity within the diaspora.[16]

Endnotes

1. One may see how this legacy has impacted current discourse on Islamized Armenians and those who do not speak Armenian.

2. Current young Western and Eastern Armenians have difficulty in fully grasping the counterpart language.

3. For further detail on the role of these merchant elites, consult: Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006;Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley: California World History Library, 2011.

4. "…exile is also a fecund space for elaborating new forms and ways of organizing experience, creating new affiliations, associations, and communities, for developing new identities". John Sorenson, "Essence and Contingency in the Construction of Nationhood: Transformations of Identity in Ethiopia and Its Diasporas" *Diaspora*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 1991, p. 201.

5. Partisanship, ideological differences, and the three religious denominations nonetheless fell under the shared umbrella of a common destiny and broader cultural features.

6. In European countries, where the Armenian communities were less insulated and where the state system was more proactive, the impact of WWII virtually destroyed all the small spaces that the refugee community had constructed for itself.

7. Diaspora Armenians who expressed sympathy towards Soviet Armenia were persecuted as Communists. Nonetheless, certain Lebanese Armenian newspapers never stopped publishing positive stories on developments in Soviet Armenia.

8. In certain Arab countries, a minority of Armenians felt differently about conscription, which extended for some 18 months, and actively tried to avoid it. In other countries, Armenians joined the resistance forces against the Nazis during WWII (in France and Greece for instance). In Iran, the Armenians were conscripted and fought against the Iraqi army, which had Iraqi Armenian citizens among its ranks. See Eliz Sanasarian, "State Dominance and Communal Perseverance: The Armenian Diaspora in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-1989," *Diaspora*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Winter 1995, pp. 243-266;
    ԻՍԿԱՆԴԱՐ ԻՍԿԱՆԴԱՐՅԱՆ,*ԻՐԱՆԻ ՎՐԱ ՊԱՐՏԱԴՐՎԱԾ ՈՒԹԱՄՅԱ ՊԱՏԵՐԱԶՄԸ ԵՎ ԻՐԱՆԱՀԱՅՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ*(Iskandar Iskandarian," The Eight-year War Imposed on Iran and the Iranian-Armenians")ԵՐԵՎԱՆ. ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ. ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆ, ՀԱՅ-ԻՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՐԱԲԵՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ ԿԵՆՏՐՈՆ, ԵՐԵՎԱՆ2006. In Lebanon they maintained positive neutrality in the Lebanese infighting, while in Syria they joined the state army and in certain areas the local Kurdish defensive forces.

9. See Susan Pattie, "At Home in Diaspora: Armenians in America," *Diaspora*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1994, pp. 185-198.

10. For a better understanding of these strategies consult: Anthony Arnove, "The Strategies of Transnational Communications," *Diaspora*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Winter 1995, pp. 341-368.

11. It is claimed that this mode of perception was propagated in order to preserve heritage in the diaspora.

12. The outflowing population redefined the Armenian diaspora in at least two ways: the newcomers neither spoke Western Armenian nor had their roots in Western Armenia, and were largely composed of migrant workers.

13. In the early 1990s, these included the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war and the Iraq-Iran war, along with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, all of which rendered Armenian families vulnerable.

14. Initially, the state called in a number of high-ranking experts and professionals from the diaspora and included them in the highest bodies of bureaucracy, and namely the cabinet and the foreign, energy and economy ministries. This trend has not continued. See Khachig Tololyan, "Commentary", *Diaspora*, Vol. 1, Number 2, Fall 1991, p. 226.

15. The diaspora was instrumental in its support to the Karabagh conflict. Over 100 volunteers joined the Karabagh forces from the diaspora, which was active in raising awareness about the Armenian aspect of the conflict. Middle East Armenian media stressed the human rights dimension of the conflict rather than its religious connotations. By the same token the Middle East diaspora has made extra efforts to separate Islam from the genocide by underlining the fact that genocide was not an Islamic act on the Christian Armenians, but an ethnic act committed by the Turks.

16. RA TV stations are commonplace throughout the world; although there is no consensus about their quality, programming, and the language used. As the diaspora is extremely diverse, it is impossible to satisfy all tastes and demands.

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