FROM REFUGEES TO DECENT SYRIAN CITIZENS: ARMENIANS IN SYRIA UNDER THE FRENCH MANDATE (1921-1939)

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The majority of Syrian-Armenians are the descendants of Ottoman-Armenians who survived the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Various localities in Ottoman-Syria formed the main destination of forced displacement following the Genocide and its immediate aftermath. Mass violence against Armenians did not terminate in 1915, though. It continued, in different forms at various times and places throughout the 1920s, resulting in three big migration waves first to Ottoman, and later to French mandated Syria and Lebanon. The initial and the biggest wave to Syria was during 1915, when Armenians were exiled to concentration camps inside Ottoman-Syria.[1] Many of these became the sites of the ugliest massacres. The second biggest wave corresponds to the end of the war in Cilicia between the French army and the Turkish nationalist forces,[2] which was followed by the Ankara agreement (October 20, 1921) delimiting the border between the newly founded Turkish Republic and Syria under the French mandate.[3] The third wave of expulsion towards French Syria, in particular north-eastern Syria, took place following Turkey's military suppression of the Kurdish Sheikh Said Revolt in 1925. Armenians who had survived the Genocide and had continued living under the "protection" of local Kurdish lords, in south-eastern Turkey, yet in a totally devastated world, had lost their shield, due to the social and political break-up of the Kurdish habitat by the Turkish state. According to figures compiled by the League of Nations, 8000 to 10,000 Armenians from the countryside of Diyarbekir, Batman, Mardin, Şirnak, Si'rt, Bitlis, and Cizre joined the Armenian deportees who had arrived in Syria earlier in 1915-16 and 1921-23.[4]

Along with other groups, Armenians arrived in French-Syria and Lebanon as refugees, and many, but not all, initially lived in refugee camps on the outskirts of main Syrian towns and along the Turkish-Syrian border. Despite being under-researched, the refugee issue was one of the most controversial issues in the post-WWI Levant, posing serious concerns not only for the governing colonial powers and the home state, but also for both the displaced and host populations.[5] The relationship between the newcomers, and the local society, as well as the Arab nationalists and French colonial state were not static and unidimensional. Ahistorical and sectarian explanations fall short of explaining the multi-layered and complex encounters that were often shaped through the political, economic and social concerns of the involved parties. This

article, by focusing on the public debates (in)directly around the refugee issue at certain political moments in the 1920s and 30s in French-Syria, attempts to shed light on the process of construction of hegemonic Syrian-Armenianness.

The history of the post-genocide Armenian world is an understudied scholarly field, as is that of the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon.[6] One of the most significant reasons underlying the scarcity of studies in post-genocide Armenian history is the continuing denial of the Turkish state vis-à-vis the Genocide, and hence the inevitable (non-)academic focus to demonstrate that Armenians had been subjected to genocidal violence sponsored by the Ottoman empire in 1915. Thus, most studies are political histories that concentrate on modern Armenian history until 1915. Since the 1960s, the (non)scholarly field of post-genocide Armenian history in Syria has been comprised of a small number of local histories of hometowns, histories of Armenian institutions founded in Syria, memoirs and journalistic accounts, mostly in Armenian and at times in Arabic. Few scholarly works, though, have incorporated the social, economic and political history of the Armenian refugees into the general history of French-Syria. Furthermore, no theoretical engagement with the fields of mandate history, imperial history and refugee studies has been embarked on.

Similarly, mainstream Syrian-Armenian memories present history as already "clean" in a self-made way without any process of negotiation, conflict or resistance. These narratives leave no room for tracking the confrontations of the various local actors with the colonial/national state power and the resulting transformations in the political and social subjectivities. This paper attempts to problematize such ahistorical narratives and unveil the processes of conflictual or other encounters between the locals and Armenian refugees following their arrival at their new residences. Through these processes rival understandings of Syrian-Armenianness were carved out in Syria under the French mandate (1921-1946).

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In the Syrian-Armenian collective memory - regardless of the later refugee waves - 1915 is seen as the decisive event, a violent ending, but also a new beginning and a new period of struggle in a hostile and foreign setting in Ottoman- and later in French-Syria. The 1915 violence which took different forms in social, economic, cultural, and geographic terms, constitutes the foundation of *all* the historical narratives. Be they local history or the history of the French mandate, the narratives begin with the lengthy and extensive narratives of violence of all kinds that the Armenians were exposed to back in their native towns and on the way to, or prior to, their arrival in Syria. An entire life was left behind in an absolute fashion and would not be returned. Its fields, trees, rivers, and climate are remembered with extreme grief, and the new refuge is never really a substitute. The French mandate rule found upon arrival

in Syria and the colonial agency are obscured, or rather assimilated, into a survival narrative where the main provider is depicted as the "(Arab) Syrians" if not the "Armenian community" itself. The new life in French-Syria indicates a positive change from bad to good, from insecurity, fear, instability and oppression back in the hometown to security, stability, and tolerance in the host land. Generosity and respect on the part of Syrian Arabs are presented as the underlying factors in this novel safety and security. No mention is made of the distress felt by the local Syrians due to the refugee inflow, nor of the dominant French colonial perspective vis-à-vis the Christian refugees and the fragile bargaining between the two, nor of the tacit agreement between the Syrian Arab nationalists and the Armenian leadership of the early 1930s.

THE REFUGEE ISSUE IN FRENCH-SYRIA

Surviving the massacres and arriving in Syria under conditions of extreme impoverishment, the refugees' survival and later gradual integration into the host society was not as smooth as the official history and present-day memories claim. Neither the Arab nationalist press of the 1920s nor the local population was as welcoming and tolerant towards the newcomers as the later written histories and memories allege. Still, one should refrain from assuming that the Christian refugee-local population relationship was one-dimensional, or that the Syrian Arab nationalist elites were unanimous. The relationship took different forms according to region, class, politics and other factors.

However, there is almost no integrated and relational history of the controversial encounters between the incoming refugees and the local population during the early days of French colonial rule in Syria.[7] Nora Arissian's work in Arabic entitled "Echoes of the Armenian Genocide in the Syrian Press" may be considered the first attempt to write the history of the Armenian Genocide through the eyes of Syrian Arab nationalists.[8] Together with her study of the memoirs of Syrian intellectuals on the genocide,[9] her work has paved the way for further research on the topic.[10]

Regarding the refugee issue, the French authorities were concerned with the economic, social, and political costs of settling refugees in inner Syria or in the Turco-Syrian frontier zone. They had to deal with the matter without running into a deep crisis of legitimacy, in the eyes of both the local Muslim majority and the refugee Christians in Syria. Justifying their presence in Syria and Lebanon as "the protectors of Christians of the Orient," the mandate authorities had to avoid increasing anxiety among Syrian Arab nationalists, too. French diplomatic archives are full of reports from the 1920s about the refugee populations - especially Armenians and Kurds from Turkey, and Assyrians from British Iraq - and various projects for their settlement. These documents demonstrate that the French mandatory central authorities did not adopt a

comprehensive refugee policy, but embraced a pragmatic approach that took into account particular political, economic, diplomatic, and social concerns.

In parallel, the new Turkish republic was anxious about an "enclave of undesirables" - in particular, Armenians and Kurdish political refugees - formed outside its control, just south of its border in northern Syria.[11] Numerous items of correspondence between Ankara and the French High Commissariat in Beirut include Turkish complaints over "malicious elements," namely the Armenians in the frontier zone and rebellious Kurdish tribes residing in Syria.[12] The settlement of Armenians along the Turkish-Syrian border, their recruitment into the French administration and army, and trans-border incursions by Kurds into Turkey form the *sine qua non* topic of the intelligence reports, telegrams, and other correspondence between 1925 and 1927. The French are criticized for providing protection to Kurdish rebels and allowing the settlement of Armenians in areas near the border.

The French central authorities were well aware of the need to regulate the refugee flow. The High Commissariat in Beirut had, after 1925, become more responsive to the demands of the Turkish Foreign Ministry. In a report drafted after the Sheikh Said Revolt and entitled "Du Passage en Syrie des Populations Kurdes ou Chrétiens ou des Déserteurs Turcs," High Commissar Maurice Sarrail overtly proposed to Paris to "organize the regulations pertaining to accepting refugees in Syria."[13] Despite the pragmatic approach adopted by the French central authorities, certain local officers still held their ground and took initiative in the settlement of the refugees, in particular Kurdish refugees from Turkey. In a letter dated January 27, 1925, a local French officer describes the Turkish allegations of Armenian colonization on the border as mistaken and exaggerated:

> Since the beginning of the armistice, the biggest problem that the mandatory power has been trying to resolve is the refugee problem. We have received 96,450 refugees since then, and they are all impoverished people. France has made great economic sacrifices for them. Just for the sake of relieving pressure on the north of Syria, we have settled two-thirds of these poor people in inner Syria. The rest reside in Aleppo and in the Sanjak of Alexandretta, and their settlements were realized calmly and in deference to the Muslim population.[14]

Syrian Arab nationalists, too, hotly debated the "refugee problem." This was as much a political issue as it was a social and economic problem until the mid-1920s, especially as the settlement of refugee groups - in particular the Armenians, in inner Syrian cities - began to be socio-economically more visible.[15] Relief, food programs, and settlement arrangements were offered in particular to Armenian refugees by several missionary organizations, as well as

the French mandatory authorities. The refugee issue along with the French surrender of some Syrian land to Turkey formed the two major criticisms by Syrian-Arab nationalist elites as they expressed their indignation towards the Ankara Agreement in the early mandate years. The arrival and settlement of the refugees either in inner Syrian towns or in remote corners of the state were directly linked to colonial "divide and rule" politics. The flow of refugees into the Syrian space, which persisted throughout the 1920s without any expression of consent by the local Syrians, evoked a "lack of agency" because of a "sovereignty deficit" in the Syrian national self. Arguing that Syria had turned into a "whore," as refugees could freely enter the country, several articles in the nationalist press demanded regulation of the border without regard to the ethnicity and religion of the refugee group.

The refugee issue was not necessarily experienced as, or translated into, sectarian Muslim-Christian hostility, though. French colonial accounts viewed the conflict through sectarian lenses and argued that it was due to "some chauvinistic personalities, in particular the Muslims who were apprehensive of the arrival of an avalanche of Christians since their presence would have an effect on the election results." Despite the fact that the situation also gained a sectarian dimension in later years, French reports usually underestimated the social and economic dimension of the issue as well as the everyday tensions between the local Syrian Christians and the incoming Christian refugees. The memories of refugee Christians about their early days in Aleppo refer to the uneasiness in everyday interaction between local Christians and incoming refugee Christians.[16]

The refugee issue was intensified every now and then during different political circumstances, like general elections, the announcement of the new citizenship law (1925), the year of the economic crisis (1929), and throughout the period between 1925 and 1933 when the refugee inflow to Jazira was at its peak.

Aleppo, having the biggest migrant population, was the city where social and economic discomfort was translated into communal fights, thanks to French sectarian politics in relation to governing the ethno-religious difference in Syria and Lebanon.[17] 35% of Aleppo's population was composed of Christians, and French officers embarked on manipulative efforts to "counter" Arab nationalist political activity through playing the "Christian card." In two important instances the refugee issue had top priority in the nationalist political agenda. One instance was the late 1920s, when the adverse effects of the Great Depression started to be felt in French-Syria as the Syrian pound was tightly tied to the fluctuations of the French franc.[18] The second corresponded to the settlement of Kurds, Armenians, Syriacs and other Christians from Turkey in Jazira between 1925 and 1930. Despite a relative decrease after 1930, the

arrival of nine thousand Iraqi-Assyrians in French Jazira in 1933 provoked great anger among Arab nationalists.[19]

In the early 1920s, the main focus of Syrian discomfort was the colonization of Syrian space by the refugee population. The immigrants (*muhajirun*) were targeted as being the cause of the economic adversities and social deprivation experienced by the local Aleppenes. The nationalist press drew a fundamental distinction between the newcomers and the locals, usually without referring to the religion or ethnic affiliations of the newcomers. In certain instances, the refugees were labelled "parasites" [*muhajina, tufayli*] who arrived in the country and seized the locals' jobs; yet the local population was not defined in exclusive religious or ethnic terms such as "Muslims" or "Arabs." An article in *Alifba'* in 1923 reads:

> There is no force that prevents their flood-like assault on us. They are the main cause of the inflation and lack of premises for rent in the city. The misfortune is there in front of our eyes, but we can do nothing to get rid of this curse [*bala'*].[20]

The same article continued with a softer tone by referring to "Syrian generosity:"

> If we were well to do, we would help them, but that's enough! We are not against the distribution of land to those poor refugees, but everything has a limit; the facilities provided for refugees have exceeded those limits. The number of immigrants and strangers [*ghuraba*] is more than the number of locals [*wataniyyun*] in government offices and the number of refugee workers in the city is more than local workers.

The excessive number of jobless refugees, who were stealing the jobs of Syrians[21] where there was already unemployment[22] was a commonly recurring phrase in the newspaper stories of the early 1920s. Another "misfortune" introduced by the refugees, according to the nationalist press, was their sets of values [*nizam 'orfi*] which were viewed as "harmful" for the country. The Damascene Arab nationalist newspaper *Al-Sha'b* noted that the communal-land ownership system [*nizam masha'a*] in the Armenian settlements [*musta'marat*] resembled that of the communist system which the whole world, [including the French] were against ... the head of the village allots the land to the villagers in the settlement; he distributes the equipment, collects the harvest and distributes it equally between the villagers and also it is he who takes the collective decisions concerning the daily needs of the settlement population.[23]

The author first compared this system to the collective landownership of feudal times, then drew parallels between the social structure of the Armenians and that of a militaristic order, and lastly argued that this social order was

informed by "communist principles." The article ended with the author's call for attention to the alarming likely "contamination of Syria by the red danger." By bringing the "red danger" into the refugee issue, the writer appealed to the anti-communist sensitivities of the French mandatory power, and highlighted both "common interests" and "common enemies" shared by the Syrian-Arab nationalist elites, as the ruled, and the French, as the ruler.

The granting of Syrian citizenship to the Armenian refugees by the mandate authorities in September 1924 institutionalized the Armenians as one of the nine sects (*millet*) in French-Syria. It was one of the first instances where the religion of the refugees was referred to in an explicit way. Watenpaugh calls the negotiations between the colonial power and the Armenian refugees a "survivor's bargain." He argues that the "ambiguous and vulnerable status of the Armenians in Syria forced the communities to mobilize political and cultural resources and to accept governmental and non-governmental paternal and, albeit, often altruistic help, a process which he denotes as a "survivor's bargain" after Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of "patriarchal bargain."[24] In return for their cooperation with the social, economic, and ideological processes of imperialism, the Armenian sect would receive material and discursive support for its corporate preservation as a distinct entity and its transformation into a distinct class. Writing the conflictual local-refugee relationship into a sectarian ledger was still not the hegemonic political narrative in Syria in the 1920s. However, the French colonial strategy of reinforcing and expanding the political spaces reserved for Armenians in the new confessional system in Syria, in order to advance their interests, accentuated this alignment. The immediate aftermath of the 1926 elections - when the High Commissioner decided to redistribute some of the existing seats in the Syrian national representative council in order to counter the nationalist vote - triggered anti-Armenian sentiments. These were manifested in terms of Muslim-Christian contests in Aleppo.[25] As a result of French manipulation of population figures, the Armenians were accorded two representatives in the 1926 parliamentary elections,[26] and these elections were boycotted as illegitimate by the leading nationalist political party, al-Kutla al-Wataniyya. "Within only forty-eight hours, the Christians came to have six whereas the Muslim majority got only five seats" stated the newspaper *Al-Sha'b* with bewilderment and anger.[27] The article continued: "By decreasing the number of Muslims from 30 thousand to 25 thousand and by not recording the number of Armenians emigrating out of Syria, the locals' [*ahl al-balad*] right to vote and elect was conferred on foreigners."[28]

The unity of Syria was the primary political agenda of the Arab nationalist movement in the 1920s. The nationalists continuously protested against secession [*infisal*], i.e. the division of Syria into four autonomous units [*al-*

aqdiyya al-arba']. The divided Syria was labelled "the dispossessed homeland" [*al-watan al-salb*], while "united Syria" [*al-wahda al-suriyya*] was put forward as the goal [*dhala*] aspired to by the Syrians. All Arab nationalist parties (from the most radical Shahbandaris to the pro-French liberal constitutionalists), had invested in the question of Syrian unity, which was fiercely contested by the French and their local Syrian beneficiaries; however, the nationalists rarely radically questioned the legitimacy of French rule in their approach to the refugee issue. Particularly in the years of economic hardship in the late 1920s, one hardly comes across radical critiques of French colonial rule or its role in hindering economic development in Syria. It was usually the refugees who were slandered, othered and viewed as the cause of unemployment and rising prices. The French colonial state was appealed to, in the search for common ground against the refugees, or at times, against Turkish assaults and harmful propaganda that endangered the Syrian entity [*kayân*]. The French mandate authorities were asked for "proper governance" and were reminded of their mandate responsibilities towards Syria as assigned by the League of Nations.[29]

One of the rare instances when French rule in Syria was directly opposed by the locals was in the immediate aftermath of the first massive anti-French uprising, the Great Revolt (1925), where a battalion of Armenian-French soldiers fought Syrian anti-French rebels.[30] It led to an attack by Syrian nationalists on the Armenian quarter in Damascus and the killing of some thirty Armenians. These killings, however, were 'justified' because of the Armenians' "proven unfaithfulness" and the claim that "they [the Armenians] have been fighting against those on whose land they are camping."[31] The French were blamed for the Armenian presence in Syria, and thus for the colonization [*istia'mar*] of Syria and the mobilization of Armenians against local Syrians.

In prallel with the above-mentioned economic deprivation and social and political apprehensions regarding French rule in the country, the last and biggest wave of refugees from the eastern provinces of Turkey in the late 1920s, and of Assyrians from Iraq in 1933 to northeastern Syria, *Jazira*, caused extreme alarm and anxiety among Syrian Arab nationalists. The way the nationalists reacted to this latest influx of refugees differed from their previous reactions and was expressed as "harmful strangers vs. outraged Syrians." The settlement of these refugees in Jazira was considered a "violation of the sanctity of the Syrian body and national self," while the refugees were viewed as French "columns."[32] The arrival of refugees in big numbers created fear that more people were on their way to Syria. The newspapers were full of news giving fictitious numbers for new "incursions." It was through this controversial and contested process of the French opening up of the Jazira lands to non-Arab and non-Muslim refugees that Jazira came into conflict with the Syrian national body for the first time.

Syrian Arab nationalists viewed the settlement of refugees in Syrian Jazira and the following land distribution to refugees as fundamentally unjust and illegitimate acts, comparable in essence to the "settlement of Zionist settlers in Palestine." Nationalist newspapers described the French- and League of Nations-sponsored projects of settlement in Jazira as part of a greater plan for creating an Armenian homeland [*watan qawmi armani*] in the middle of the "Arab homeland." Unlike during earlier periods, the French mandate rule and the "humanitarian aid" of the League of Nations were condemned as being pretexts for the "occupation of the country by Armenians." *Al-Sha'b* wrote that "the more money is donated to the Armenians by the League of Nations, the more Armenians will flow to Jazira, which will soon result in turning Jazira into their national homeland."[33] Moreover, talks between the French authorities and Armenian community leaders, asking permission to build permanent houses and to transfer the Armenians from the refugee camps to the newly built residences, were interpreted as a request for a new homeland.[34] This instance seems to have left an important imprint on the Armenian collective memory in Aleppo even in the 2000s. Armenian interviewees in Aleppo remembered this historical incident as an event which affirms the "official Arab generosity" renouncing Arab society's "jealous" tendencies.

The anxiety about (dis)unity of Syrian land, to which French colonial, religious and administrative politics contributed greatly, led Arab nationalists to perceive the arrival of the refugees and the gradual improvement of their lot as "penetration into Syrian land by building houses thanks to donations from western states, especially Britain." If not on the streets, certainly in their newspapers, nationalists protested that "they [the Syrians] have to pay the price of the refugees' tragedy [*musiba*]",[35] and at the same time suffer under their "invading armies" [*al-juyush al-ghaziyya*].[36]

"The settlement of the refugees on Syrian-Arab land" - an expression that frequently pops up in the newspapers, is usually followed by an account of the role of "foreign powers" in the "derogation" of Syria, its land and people. It reveals Syrian nationalist anxiety due to the lack of self/national agency in the making of their own historical destiny. The articles evoked grievances resulting from the unjust treatment and neglect of Syrian agency. The title of the above-mentioned article, "Disrespected Syria" [*Suriyya allati la hurmata laha*] epitomizes this national(ist) anxiety due to the "sovereignty deficit" of the Syrians concerning their domestic issues. *Al-Sha'b* stated that "from the time the Armenians left their homeland, the doors of all countries have been shut in their faces, except this country. It is the security and peace provided by the French that led them to enter here."[37] The article noted that the League of Nations had approached all the western countries, and eventually the French had consented and chosen "Upper Jazira" as a suitable spot.

Nationalist press articles of the late 1920s and the early 1930s, which coincided with the last wave of refugees to Jazira, apparently embraced a more reactionary tone and evoke indignation. It is the refugees who are reproached and become the object of indignation in the first place. Such articles often ended with a demand to stop both recent Zionist and Armenian migration to the "eastern Arabian land" [*bilad al-sharq al-'arabi*]. This was assertive and self-confident rhetoric that claimed to represent a united and active Arab nation calling for addressing the issue of earlier immigrants too. "Their stay among us will not last long" wrote *Al-Sha'b* in a threatening tone and continued:

> Jazira is a Syrian Arab land. The Syrians will give it neither to the Armenians nor to non-Armenians ... They [the Arabs] will resist the settlement by all means possible. We warn the Armenians that a future life in Syria, next to the "angry Arab," will be insecure.

Arab nationalists did not embrace a colonial attitude towards the refugees. The latter were deemed to have a nation-state of their own too, just as the Syrians were aspiring to one. Several articles in the 1930s acknowledged the inevitability of establishing an Armenian national home and proposed Yerevan for that matter. The Yerevan option was argued to be "to the benefit of all" including the Armenians, Syrians, French and Turks. The Armenians should "spare themselves as well as the Arab states - Iraq, Palestine but most of all Syria - this misery. They should be rid of danger [*khatar*] and evil [*aswaih*], while at the same time the Turks should no longer be annoyed by their presence to their immediate south."[38]

Against this Arab nationalist fervor and the increase in inter-communal clashes, Armenian political parties addressed the Arab public, stating their good will. *Le Liban*, an Armenian newspaper, stated in an article written in Arabic dated May 15, 1930:

> Armenians were bound to come to Syria, but they never had the intention to create a national home there. Armenians indeed have a national homeland, but it is under the Soviet yoke; whenever it is re-opened, they are going to return there.[39]

Similarly, a joint declaration by the Armenian Hintchak and Ramgavar parties, stated that Armenians had only one homeland, which was Armenia. In this hospitable country, their only effort was to provide for the needs of their families and assure education for their children. They would like to see cordial relations maintained between the Arabs and the Armenians while misunderstandings that gave rise to suspicions were stamped out."[40] Likewise, other Armenian journals gave reassurances that Syria could not be compared to Palestine or the Armenians in the USSR. Obviously, it was high time to

propagate a new image of the refugee Armenian. An article in the Aleppo Armenian journal *Yeprad* published on May 24, 1930, signals the emergence of the "hardworking and apolitical Armenian guest" image in the Syrian collective memory:

> The Armenian is hospitalized [sent to hospital] in this country and this fact is accepted by the mandatory power and the noble Arab people. It is clear that hospitalized people do not have a claim to pursue politics. The so-called project of 'installation of an Armenian homeland in Syria' has therefore no foundation and is beyond imagination.[41]

As the Armenian parties aimed at maintaining amicable relations with both the French and Arab nationalists, they started taking a more pragmatic approach in the mid-1930s and moved towards cooperating with the Arab nationalists, particularly after 1936.[42] To be sure, the Armenian Communists had always sided with the Arab nationalist struggle for full independence.

GOOD REFUGEE VS. BAD REFUGEE (1936-39)

The refugee issue resurfaced in a different context following the Franco-Syrian Treaty (1936), which promised independence to the country within the next five years and foresaw the incorporation of the autonomously administered regions of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the Sanjak of Alawites, the Sanjak of Druze and Jazira into a centralized and united Syria. The treaty was never ratified, but the fierce controversy over two fundamental articles of the treaty - the protection of minorities and unity of Syria - had long-lasting implications for non-Muslim and non-Arab Syrians in general. Two rival political movements, namely the Unionists and the Autonomists, in their French designations, contested these provisions. The Unionist group embraced the Arab nationalist ideal of full independence in a united Syria, while the Autonomists demanded an additional article in the Syrian constitution, namely the protection of minorities, as well as a decentralized Syria through the continuation of the status of the autonomously administered regions under the French mandate. It is during these years that the notion of minority and majority was contested by both groups to advance their political claims.[43] The Autonomists oscillated between an ethno-religious basis and a territorial definition of minority-ness and demanded special protection of minorities. The Unionists, however, avoided confronting the minority question. They rather opted for the incorporation and/or assimilation of the ethno-religious/regional entities into Syrian Arab national identity/territory, thereby counter-posing the notion of minority of the politically dissident Autonomists. The nationalist slogan "religion is for God and the nation is for all" evoked this idea.

The interconnectedness of the notions of political dissidence and refugee status in Syrian Arab nationalist imagery is related particularly to the Autonomy Movement in Jazira. The Autonomist faction in Jazira asked for special minority status for the region, whose population was comprised mostly of Christian and Kurdish refugees from Turkey and aspired to the continuation of the region's autonomous administrative status under the French mandate. While the Autonomists depicted the Jazirans under the rubric of minority, where the history of refugee-ness and certain other criteria were designated as the markers of minority status, a significant number of Arab nationalists rejected the Autonomist groups' conflation of refugee-ness and minority status and often proposed a political definition of majority-ness. PM Sa'adallah Jabiri said in a speech that the "ex-refugees of the 1920s have been integrated and become like us, thus they should not ask for special treatment. Several articles in the nationalist press drew a distinction between the 'majority,' indicating those Jazirans who embraced the Arab nationalist political narrative, and the 'refugee,' namely the politically dissident and the foreign Jazirans. The leaders of the movement were labelled as "refugees who deny favour" [*nakr al-jamil*]. They were accused of lacking bona fides [*husn al-mukafa'*] and were described as "not being ashamed to steal our lands."[44] Eventually the notion of refugee denoted 'minority' and meant the 'interest-seeker dissident rebel.' As minority-ness conjured up the image of political dissident contesting the ideological hegemony of the Arab nationalist discourse of 'organic national harmony,' the 'majority,' as it was appropriated in nationalist imagery, soon conjured up the image of "simple people who are only interested in their daily bread, and nothing else."[45] In a way, the Syrian-Armenians along with other Christians in Syria entered the post-colonial era as they adopted the nationalist rules of the post-colonial political field, in reference to which they redefined their political aspirations.

The most explicit sign of the pragmatic consent of the Syrian Christian refugees to an incorporationist, yet static, definition of Syrian national belonging came after two bloody incidents in mid-1937: the Sunday market incident in Aleppo and the Amouda incidents in Jazira. After each incident, Christian-Arab nationalist religious leaders intervened to calm down the Christian community and reassure the Muslim majority. The Armenian Orthodox Prelate, Bishop Ardavazt Surmeyan, may be considered as one of the first initiators of the rapprochement following the Sunday market incident of October 12, 1936. In his visit to the Armenian refugee camp north of Aleppo city, he said:

> I came here with the nationalist leaders in order to invite you to be calm and to return to your work. We have every interest in having cordial relations with the Muslims. The incidents of last Sunday Market had their origin in the "White Badge"[46] who are bought and paid by certain traitors. They create discord between the members of the country in order to reach their goal. I ask therefore all Armenians to have no relations with the "White Badge" and to even prevent them from moving around [the tent-city].[47]

Until the 1940s, French Syria was still a refuge for thousands of "undesirables" for whom Turkish nationalism had left no place.[48] Negotiation between the colonial power and the Armenian refugees contributed considerably to the social and economic betterment of the Armenians, while negotiation with the local Arab nationalists helped to calm the ever-lost feeling of security and stability - but only through a patrimonial relationship and at the expense of free political agency. Nevertheless, memories of the horrors of 1915 were evoked during several incidents in the coming years. The spell of the past will start to crumble, however, when the 1915 violence is acknowledged and, as Walter Benjamin said, when "the causes of what happened … have been eliminated."[49]

ENDNOTES

[1] Khatchig Mouradian, "Genocide and Humanitarian Resistance in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1917", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Clark University, 2014.

[2] By the Mudros Armistice (October 30, 1918) Cilicia had come under French occupation, which gave rise to Armenian dreams of having a homeland in Cilicia, where the decimated Armenians who had survived the Genocide started to gather. The Turkish nationalist forces, however, forced the some 120,000-150,000 Armenians into French Syria, a second uprooting.

[3] Between 1921 and 1923, 80,000 new refugees arrived in Syria and Lebanon by land or sea. By the end of 1925, approximately 100,000 refugees were living in Syria, 50,000 in Lebanon, 10,000 in Palestine and Jordan, 40,000 in Egypt, 25,000 in Iraq, and 50,000 in Iran (Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute Mésopotamie*, Paris, Karthala, 2004; Chris Gratien, "Year of the Mosquito: Displacement and Disease in the Ottoman Empire during WWI", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2015; Richard Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow of the Armenian Minority in the Arab Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, xxvii, winter 1974. For different estimates, see Thomas H. Greenshields, "The Settlement of Armenian Refugees in Syria and Lebanon, 1915-1939," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Durham, 1978; Ara Sanjian "Armenians in the Middle East", The Teacher Training Workshop, "Minorities in the Middle East" organized by the Program in Near Eastern Studies Princeton University, 2006, unpublished paper.

[4] For an elaborate discussion of the last wave of deportations, see Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute Mésopotamie*, pp. 301-17.

[5] John Hope Simpson, *Refugees: Preliminary Report of a Survey*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1938.

[6] Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria*, NY, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2008; 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 Ph.D. dissertation, Utrecht University, June 2011; Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, California, UCLA Press, 2017; Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities*

in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011; Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class,* NY, Princeton University Press, 2006.

[7] Several works on Syria mention the bad conditions and treatment refugees faced prior to their arrival, but only in passing. Among the few critical works on the refugees are: Benjamin Thomas White, "Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-1939", *Past and Present*, 235 (1), 2017, pp. 141- 178; 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 Peter Sluglett and Nadine Méouchy (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspective*, Leiden, Brill, 2004, pp. 597-622; Keith Watenpaugh, "A Pious Wish Devoid of All Practicability: Interwar Humanitarianism, The League of Nations and the Rescue of Trafficked Women and Children in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1920-1927," *American Historical Review*, 115:4, October 2010. For Jazira, see Altuğ, "Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira"; Altug, "Armenian Genocide, Sheikh Said Revolt, and Armenians in Syrian Jazira" (www.armenianweekly.com/wp-content/files/Armenian_Weekly_April_2010.pdf); Ellen Marie Lust-Okar, "Failure of Collaboration: Armenian Refugees in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32, 1, 1996, pp. 53-68.

[8] Nora Arissian, *Asda' al-Ibada al-Armaniyya fil-Sahafa al-Suriyya 1877-1930*, Beirut, Zakira Press, 2004.

[9] Both books were banned in Syria until 2011.

[10] Nora Arissian, *Ghawa'il al-Arman fil-Fikr al-Suri*, Beirut, Dar al-Furat, 2002. For a survey of existing Arabic literature on the Armenian Genocide, see Nikolay Hovhannisyan, *Arab Historiography on the Armenian Genocid*e, Yerevan, National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia Institute of Oriental Studies, 2005. Rifaat Mohammad has also made an excellent survey of Egyptian sources on the Armenian Genocide: Rifaat Mohammad, "Al-Qadiyya al-Armaniyya fil-Masadir al-'Arabiyya" [The Armenian question according to Arab sources], paper presented at the conference, "The Armenian Genocide and International Law," organized by Haigazian University, Beirut, September 2009.

[11] Seda Altuğ and Benjamin White, "Frontières et Pouvoir d'État: La Frontière Turco-Syrienne dans les Années 1920 et 1930," *Vingtième Siècle*, September 2009.

[12] Seda Altuğ, "Türkiye Suriye ile Sinirini Temizlerken" (Turkey clearing up its border with Syria), *Agos*, April 9, 14 and 27, 2007.

[13] CADN, Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique, Box 572, Service des Renseignements, Service Central, no. 868/K.S., March 5, 1925, Beirut.

[14] MAE, Série Syrie-Liban, vol. 177, Relation Turquie-Française.

[15] Greenshields, p. 60.

[16] Kamil al-Ghazzi, *Kitab Nahr al-Dhahab fi Tarikh Halab*, 3 vols., Shawqi Sha'th and Mahmoud Fakhouri (eds.), Aleppo, Arab Pen Press, 1991. One of the few sources that mentions the tensions between the local Christian and incoming Christians is a book by the ex Syriac-Catholic priest of Aleppo, Arch. Ignatius Dick, *Al-Hudur al-Masihi fi Halab*, Aleppo, Rum-Catholic Publishing House, 2003, 3 vols.

[17] Pierre La Mazière, *Partant pour la Syrie*, Paris, Libraire Baudiniere, 1926, pp. 200-3.

[18] Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, NY, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 85-91.

[19] Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Lebanon and Syria under the French Mandate*, London, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 213; *Al-Ayyam*, September 10, 1934.

[20] *Alifba'*, October 26, 1923.

[21] "*Yuzahimun 'Amal Wataniyyun 'Ala Rizqihim wa Khayrat al-Balad.*"

[22] "Hawadis wa Akhbar Mahalliyya, Halat al-Arman al-Laji'in li-Suriyya, al-Nizam al-Shiu'ai wa Mazari'au al-Arman," *Al-Sha'b*, December 21, 1928.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 603.

[25] Longrigg, pp. 171-2.

[26] Khoury, p. 129-30.

[27] "Huquq al-Akthariyya wal-Aqalliyat", *Al-Sha'b*, April 3, 1928.

[28] Ibid.

[29] *Al-Sha'b*, December 20 & 21, 1928.

[30] Khoury, p. 171.

[31] "Al-Arman wa-Qadiyyat Iskanuhum fi Suriyya", *Al-Sha'b*, December 21, 1926.

[32] "Suriyya allati la Hurmata Laha", *Al-Sha'b*, November 13, 1935.

[33] "Al-Watan al-Qawmi al-Armani fi Shimal, Yu'allim al-Suriyyin," *Al-Sha'b*, November 3, 1928.

[34] Ibid.

[35] "*mahmulin 'alayna hamlan*"

[36] "Al-Watan al-Qawmi al-Armani fi Suriyya, D'awa al-Orient ila Iskan al-Arman fil-Jazira," *Al-Sha'b*, January 28, 1930.

[37] "Al-Watan al-Qawmi," *Al-Sha'b*, November 3, 1928.

[38] "Al-Watan al-Qawmi al-Armani fi Suriyya."

[39] CADN, Cabinet Politique, Box 576, Service Politiques, Bureau d'études, "l'Arménie et les Arméniens", rédacteur: cdt. Terrrier.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Miglioriono, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria*, pp. 58-62.

[43] Neither 'majority' nor 'minority' is a pre-given and fixed social category. For the historical construction of the notions of minority and majority in French-Syria, see White, *The Emergence*.

[44] "Wataniyyat al-Fikra wa Masharia' al-Sahra," *Al-Qabs*, Feb. 5, 1938.

[45] Several newspaper articles from the Arab nationalist press of the time construct the "nationalist majority" in Jazira as such.

[46] For the White Badge (Fr: l'Insigne Blanc, Ar: al-shara al-bayâ') see, Khoury, *Syria*, p. 470 and Keith Watenpaugh, "Steel Shirts, White Badges and the Last Qabadāy: 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*, Damascus, IFPO Press, 2002, pp. 325-47.

[47] CADN-MAE, Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique, 392, Sûreté Générale (Aleppo), no. 3829, Oct. 16, 1936, as stated in Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, p. 271.

[48] Watenpaugh, "Towards a New Category", pp. 597-622.

[49] As quoted by Theodor Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 103.

Գաղթականներէն Օրինակելի Քաղաքացիներ. Սուրիահայերը Ֆրանսական Հոգատար Իշխանութեան Տարիներուն (1921-1939)

(Ամփոփում)

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Յօդուածը հարցադրումի տակ կ'առնէ պաշտօնական պատմագրութիւնը թէ գաղթական հայերը գրկաբաց ընդունուեցան Սուրիա: Ընդհակառակը, վերլուծական փաստարկներով հեղինակը կ'առարկէ այս փաստերուն, բացայայտելով զարգացումները դէպքերու, իրադարձութիւններու, արաբ ազգայնական եւ կրօնական դէմքերու արտայայտութեանց որոնք սկզբնական ոչ-բարեացակամ ընթացքէ բարեփոխուեցան դրական վերաբերումի:

Հեղինակը կը լուսաբանէ ներքին ծալքերը տեղական ընդվզումին դրդապատճառներուն, ինչպէս նաեւ՝ հետեւանքները, ապա նաեւ յառաջացած փոփոխութիւններուն պատճառները եւ այն լուսաբանական եւ հանդարտեցնող դերը զոր հայ կրօնական առաջնորդները ունեցան՝ թիւրիմացութեանց եւ յաւելեալ գրգռութիւններու առաջքը առնելու առումով: