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FROM DEPORTATION TO INTEGRATION: ARMENIAN SURVIVORS AND STATE FORMATION IN FAISAL IBN HUSSEIN’S SYRIA (1918-1920)

Narine Margaryan

Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

Abstract

This article examines the policies of Emir Faisal ibn Hussein toward Armenian Genocide survivors in post-Ottoman Syria between 1918 and 1920, focusing on the intersection of humanitarian assistance, minority protection, and state formation. Following the collapse of Ottoman rule, Syria became a principal refuge for tens of thousands of Armenian deportees who had survived the Armenian Genocide and remained in conditions of acute vulnerability due to famine, disease, displacement, and legal uncertainty. Against this backdrop, Faisal’s administration adopted a series of political, administrative, and humanitarian measures aimed at alleviating the suffering of Armenian survivors and incorporating them into the emerging socio-political framework of postwar Syria.

Drawing on archival sources, memoirs, contemporary press accounts, and official correspondence, the article analyzes Faisal’s personal engagement with Armenian communal leaders, institutional relief measures, decrees concerning food distribution, debt relief, and the protection and recovery of Armenian women and children subjected to forced assimilation. It further explores the tensions and limitations of these efforts, including the February 1919 anti-Armenian violence in Aleppo, local social frictions, and the broader geopolitical constraints imposed by British and French imperial competition.

The study argues that Faisal’s policies represented an important early attempt to transform humanitarian relief into a more structured framework of minority protection and civic inclusion, while simultaneously serving the political project of Arab state-building. Although ultimately constrained by regional instability and the collapse of Faisal’s Syrian rule, these initiatives contributed significantly to the stabilization, integration, and long-term institutional development of the Armenian community in Syria, laying part of the foundation for one of the most significant Armenian diaspora centers in the Middle East.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide; Armenian deportees; genocide survivors; Emir Faisal; Armenian-Syrian Relations; post-Ottoman statecraft; Armenian Diaspora

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Introduction

A pivotal period in the political history of Syria occurred in 1918 with the de facto collapse of the Ottoman Empire.¹ Following the end of World War I, Emir Faisal ibn Hussein (1885-1933),² the son of the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein ibn Ali, emerged as a key figure in shaping the future of Syria.³ On 1 October 1918, the allied forces of General Edmund Allenby, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in the Middle East, and Emir Faisal entered Damascus. The raising of the flag of the Arab Revolt over the city hall served as a symbolic demarcation of a new political epoch in the Levant. Following the definitive end of Ottoman hegemony, Faisal played a decisive role in the establishment and consolidation of a Hashemite administration. Crucially, his leadership proved instrumental in ameliorating the socio-economic conditions and securing the legal status of the Armenian deportees who had been exiled to the Syrian desert during the Armenian Genocide.

On 5 October 1918, with the authorization of Edmund Allenby, Faisal ibn Hussein established an Arab Military Government in Damascus. In his inaugural proclamation

1 From 1516 to 1918, Syria formed part of the Ottoman Empire. During these four centuries, the Ottoman authorities divided the region into various administrative units. Following the administrative reforms of 1864, these consisted primarily of the vilayets of Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut; the province of Jerusalem; and the autonomous mutasarrifate of Mount Lebanon. With the exception of Mount Lebanon – which enjoyed a distinct degree of cohesion and autonomy due to its Maronite population – these divisions possessed little significance beyond administration. It is important to note that modern territorial concepts such as Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and even the broader “Arab world” emerged only in the late Ottoman period, while Lebanon itself existed only in embryonic form. See Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria, The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992), 25.

2 Sharif Hussein bin Ali, a highly respected spiritual and political figure in the Arab world, held the title of Sharif by virtue of his Hashemite lineage and direct descent from Muhammad, regarded by Muslims as a prophet. In 1880, while residing in Constantinople, Hussein fell out of favor with Sultan Abdul Hamid II after Ottoman intelligence suspected his uncles of conspiring with European powers to secure the Sharifate under foreign protection. To avoid the Sultan’s wrath, Hussein returned to Mecca, then ruled by the rival Zaid clan. He remained there until February 1892, when the Ottoman Porte, following an investigation into family disputes conducted by the Sultan’s aide-de-camp Ratib Pasha, ordered his return to Constantinople. The summons served both to ease tensions in the Hijaz and to uphold the long-standing Ottoman policy of keeping potential claimants to the Sharifate under close imperial supervision.

In March 1893, Hussein’s family, including his sons Faisal, Ali bin Hussein, and Abdullah I of Jordan, joined him in the capital after traveling from Jeddah aboard the steamer Izzeddine. By order of the Sultan, Hussein and his sons remained under effective house arrest in Constantinople for more than a decade. Their confinement ended in 1908, when the Young Turk government appointed Hussein Emir of the Hijaz, restoring his authority over this strategically and religiously significant province. See Ali A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 13-14.

3 On 23 October 1918, Edmund Allenby formally divided the occupied eastern territories of the former Ottoman Empire, excluding Mesopotamia and the Hijaz, into three administrative zones. Occupied Enemy Territory South (OETS) comprised Palestine, including Jerusalem, Acre, and Nablus, and was placed under direct British administration. Occupied Enemy Territory North, later renamed Occupied Enemy Territory West (OETW), encompassed Mount Lebanon and the Syrian coast from Acre to Iskenderun and was administered directly by the French. Finally, Occupied Enemy Territory East (OETE) included Damascus, the territories east of the Jordan River, and southern Aleppo. This zone was placed under Arab administration and became the core of the government headed by Faisal. Allawi, *Faisal*, 153.

addressed to the “People of Syria,” Faisal thanked the population for welcoming what he described as “our victorious troops” and affirmed loyalty to Sherif Husain, who was described in the proclamation in highly honorific terms as “our Lord,” “the Sultan,” and “the Prince of the Faithful.” He further announced the establishment of an “Arab Constitutional Government... fully and absolutely independent, in the name of our Lord, Sultan Husain,” asserting authority over all Syria under the leadership of Ali Rida al-Rikabi.⁴ Alongside appeals for public order and stability, Faisal sought to reassure minority communities by emphasizing that his administration would be founded upon principles of justice and equality, guaranteeing equal rights to all Arabs, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.⁵

On 6 October 1918, with the participation of the 3rd Armenian Legion of the Eastern Legion,⁶ formed in November 1916 from Armenian exiles, Faisal liberated Beirut. By October 25, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo came under Faisal’s control. Five days later, news arrived of the armistice concluded with the Ottoman Empire.

While the victorious powers of World War I confronted the challenges of establishing peace and security, the Armenian people faced the catastrophic consequences of genocide. As a result of the deportations and massacres, approximately 880,000 Armenians found themselves “resettled” in Syria by the summer and autumn of 1915.⁷ By early 1916, however, the number of surviving deportees had already fallen sharply. According to a report by Jesse Jackson, the American consul in Aleppo, dated 3 February 1916, approximately 486,000 Armenian deportees remained in Syria.⁸ By October 1918, this

4 Ali Rida al-Rikabi (1866-1942) served as governor of Jerusalem and later as governor and military commander in Medina. In 1914, he was forced into retirement after criticizing the Ottoman government’s decision to enter World War I. During the war, he joined the nationalist society *al-Fatat* while concealing his sympathies for the Arab Revolt through outward displays of loyalty to Djemal Pasha, who later appointed him head of the Damascus municipal council. Prior to the fall of Damascus, al-Rikabi, in coordination with al-Fatat, intensified his contacts with Faisal ibn Hussein of Iraq in preparation for assuming a role in the emerging Arab administration.

5 Zeine N. Zeine, *The Struggle for Arab Independence Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of Faisal’s Kingdom in Syria* (New York: Caravan Books Delmar, 1977), 33-34.

6 The Eastern (Orient) Legion—also briefly referred to as the Armenian Legion—was a military unit of Armenian volunteers established within the French army in 1916. Its formation followed an agreement signed in London between the chairman of the Armenian National Delegation, Poghos Nubar Pasha, and Entente representatives Mark Sykes and Georges Picot. On November 15, 1916, the French War Ministry issued a decree creating the unit, officially named the “Eastern Legion,” which was approved by the French government on November 26. The decree stipulated that the Legion would be formed in Cyprus and composed primarily of Western Armenian volunteers serving under the French flag. The Legion’s objectives were to participate in the liberation of Cilicia, to advance Armenian national aspirations for the re-establishment of statehood in this historic region, and to serve as the nucleus of a future Armenian army. Active in Palestine, Lebanon, and Cilicia, the Legion not only engaged in military operations but also played a significant humanitarian role, including the rescue of Armenian women held in captivity and the relocation of orphanages from the Levant to Cilicia. See Tigran Poyadjian, *Հայկական Լեգիոնը* [The Armenian Legion] (Watertown: Paykar, 1965), 164-165; Susan Paul Pattie, *The Armenian Legionnaires: Sacrifice and Betrayal in World War I* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

7 Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 630-631.

8 *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide 1915-1917*, com. by Ara Safarian (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2004), 490.

number had declined dramatically. Of the surviving deportees, approximately 75,000 resided in Aleppo and northern Syria, 50,000 in Damascus and the Hauran region, 10,000 in Hama and Homs, 4,500 in the Latakia–Kessab region, 2,500 in Alexandretta and Baylan, and 8,000 in Lebanon. Another 10,000 deportees were dispersed across nearby areas, bringing the total number of Armenians in the region to approximately 160,000.⁹

The deportees faced rapidly increasing mortality rates as a result of famine, epidemics, and the unsanitary conditions of the tent cities. Between 1918 and 1919, the Armenian population in Syria declined further, as severe socio-economic hardship compelled many survivors to relocate to Cilicia in the hope of resettlement under French administration. Unlike the local population, which was primarily concerned with postwar recovery, Armenian deportees continued to live in a state of uncertainty and transience, sustained by the hope of eventually returning to a restored homeland. At the same time, the struggle for basic survival, including access to food, shelter, and employment, gradually encouraged their integration into both the broader Syrian environment and the local Armenian community.

During his administration, Faisal ibn Hussein undertook significant efforts to alleviate these difficulties and to promote Armenian-Syrian Arab coexistence. However, these local humanitarian initiatives were increasingly overshadowed by the shifting paradigms of international diplomacy. Emir Faisal's administration in Syria operated within a volatile environment defined by internal factionalism and the competing geopolitical interests of Great Britain and France. French policy following the Armistice of Mudros provides a clear example of this dynamic: Armenian survivors were strategically redirected toward Cilicia both to mitigate potential social instability in Syria and to establish a loyal demographic base for French territorial claims.

Consequently, the management of displaced populations was not merely a humanitarian concern but a foundational element in the political formation of the modern Syrian state.

From Humanitarian Assistance to Institutional Protection: Armenian Deportees in Faisal's Syria

Faisal's approach toward Armenian deportees was shaped by both political pragmatism and a broader commitment to interethnic cooperation. His favorable attitude toward the Armenians stemmed not only from humanitarian considerations but also from strategic efforts to cultivate alliances with minority communities within the framework of post-Ottoman state-building. As early as 1908, while serving alongside his brother Abdullah I of Jordan as parliamentary representatives for the Arab provinces of Jeddah and Mecca in the Ottoman Parliament, Faisal expressed support for the initial reform program

⁹ Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Ժամանակակից պատմություն Կաթողիկոսության Հայոց Եկիկիկոյ 1914-1972* [Contemporary History of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1914-1972] (Antelias: Publication of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1975), 245.

advanced by the Young Turks.¹⁰ This moderate stance earned the sympathy of Armenian parliamentary representatives and laid an early foundation for Armenian-Arab political cooperation.

Furthermore, even before the large-scale arrival of Armenian deportees in Syria, segments of the Arab leadership had already expressed solidarity with the Armenian cause. At the Arab Congress convened in Paris in June 1913, attended by prominent Arab nationalist leaders and intellectuals, a resolution was adopted that included explicit support for Armenian reforms. Article 8 of the resolution stated: “The Congress approves and expresses its solidarity with the demands of the Armenians of Turkey, which are based on the principle of decentralization.”¹¹ This declaration reflected a broader commitment to minority rights and political reform within a decentralized Ottoman framework and foreshadowed Faisal’s subsequent efforts to assist and protect Armenian refugees during his administration in Syria between 1918 and 1920.

As early as 26 June 1916, when Sharif Hussein bin Ali formally proclaimed the independence of the Arab territories from the Ottoman Empire, his declaration carried particular significance for the Armenian deportees. In addition to announcing Arab secession from Ottoman rule, Hussein explicitly referred to the suffering of the Armenians within the empire. Condemning the Young Turk regime, he argued that it had “deviated from the legal path” by abandoning the fundamental principles of Sharia upon which the Ottoman state had ostensibly been founded.¹² He further denounced the systematic destruction of Armenian men, women, and children, stating that the Ottoman authorities had left only one-tenth of the Armenian population alive.¹³

Of particular importance was a subsequent directive issued by Sharif Hussein bin Ali in 1918, which later served as a point of reference for the administrative policies of Faisal.¹⁴ On 28 April 1918 (18 Rajab 1336 AH), Hussein addressed a formal proclamation to Faisal

10 Hovhannes Aghpashian, *Արաբական ազգային-ազատագրական գաղափարը (համառոտ նોթեր)* [Arab National Liberation Awakening (Brief Notes)] (Beirut: Atlas, 1959), 14.

11 Ali Sultan, *At-Tarikh Suriya: Hukm Faisal ibn al-Husayn (1908-1918)* [History of Syria: The Reign of Faisal ibn Husayn (1908-1918)] (Damascus: Adzaluni, 1996), 176.

12 Muhammad Taher al-Omar, *Tārikh muqaddarāt al-Iraq al-Siyāsiyya* [Chronicles the Political Capabilities of Iraq] (Baghdad: Asriye, 1925), 265-266.

13 Taher al-Omar, *Chronicles*, 261.

14 Decree issued in 1918 by the Sharif of Mecca for the protection of Armenians: From Sharif Hussein bin Ali, King of the Arab Lands and Sharif and Emir of Mecca, to the honorable princes – Prince Faisal and Prince Abd al-Aziz al-Jarba – greetings and the mercy and blessings of God. Written in Umm al-Qura (Mecca) on 18 Rajab 1336 AH (29 April 1918). What is requested of you is that you protect and care for all members of the Jacobite Armenian community residing within your territories, frontiers, and tribes; assist them in all their affairs; and defend them as you would defend yourselves, your property, and your children. You are to provide them with whatever they may need, whether settled or in transit, for they are among the protected peoples of the Muslims (ahl dhimma al-muslimin). See the original Arabic text in Naim Al-Yafi, *Jamāl Bāshā l-saffāh* [Blood-Thirsty Djemal Pasha] (Latakia: Dar al-Hiwar Press, 1992), 68. Regarding the designation “Hakobikyan” (rendered as Yakubikyan in the original text), it is highly probable that Sharif Hussein bin Ali associated the term either with the Armenian Cathedral of Saint James – known in Arabic as al-Qiddis Ya‘qub – or conflated it with the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, historically referred to as the Jacobite Church.

and the tribal leader Abd al-Aziz al-Jarba, urging them to provide protection, support, and every possible form of assistance to Armenian deportees. This decree not only legitimized the presence of Armenians within Arab-controlled territories but also established an important framework for Faisal's later efforts to incorporate Armenian survivors into the emerging sociopolitical order of post-Ottoman Syria.

In addition, Faisal's political circle included several influential figures who were actively engaged in addressing the problems faced by the Armenian population. Among those who supported the implementation of policies favorable toward Armenian refugees were Sati al-Husri, Minister of Education;¹⁵ Faiz al-Ghusayn, Faisal's personal secretary and legal adviser;¹⁶ Shukri Pasha al-Ayubi, military governor of the Aleppo region;¹⁷ Hashim al-Atassi, a prominent political leader in Damascus;¹⁸ and the intellectual Omar Fakhuri.¹⁹ During the years of the Armenian Genocide, support for Armenian refugees was also consistently provided by Faris al-Khoury, an Ottoman parliamentarian from Damascus who later played a major role, alongside Faisal, in the formation of the Syrian state.²⁰

Such support was not confined to Faisal's political entourage; Faisal himself also engaged directly with Armenian survivors, demonstrating a personal interest in their plight. In early June 1917, Emir Faisal met with Armenian youths in Shoubak near Maan in Jordan. Archpriest Karapet Galfaian, who had endured the entire path of deportation, writes:

15 Sati al-Husri was a Syrian intellectual best known for formulating the idea of a unified Arab nation grounded in a shared language and culture rather than religion. In 1919, following the establishment of the independent Arab state in Syria under Faisal, al-Husri moved to Damascus, where he was appointed Director General of Education and later served as Minister of Education. He has been widely regarded as the foremost theoretician of Arab nationalism.

16 Faiz al-Ghusayn, a member of the Arab Sulut tribe from the Hauran region of southern Syria near the Jordanian border, served as kaymakam of the Kahta subdistrict in the province of Kharberd before the Armenian Genocide. An eyewitness to the genocide, he was arrested in July 1915 by order of Djemal Pasha on suspicion of anti-Turkish activities due to his involvement in the Arab nationalist society al-Fatat. He was initially exiled to Erzerum, but as Russian forces advanced toward the city, Djemal Pasha and Mehmed Reshid, governor of Diyarbekir, ordered his detention there instead, where he remained until February 1916. After a perilous journey, Faiz escaped to Der Zor, then to Basra, and eventually to India. See Faiz Al-Ghusein, *Beduin Notable of Damascus, Martyred Armenia* (London: George H. Doran, 1918), V–VII. He was an eyewitness to the genocide. His memoir was first published in Arabic in 1917 by the printing house of the *Al-Muqattam* newspaper in Cairo. Subsequently, it was translated and published in French (Geneva, 1917), English (London, 1918), German (Zurich, 1918), and Armenian (New Julfa, 1920).

17 Shukri Pasha al-Ayubi was likewise an early Arab nationalist figure. He was arrested during Djemal Pasha's crackdown on prominent Syrian nationalists in May 1916 and initially sentenced to death, although the sentence was later commuted. Al-Ayubi endured severe torture during his imprisonment and remained incarcerated until Djemal Pasha's departure from Syria. See Allawi, *Faisal*, 576.

18 Prior to the war, Hashim al-Atassi served as kaymakam of Hadjin in the Marash sanjak of the Adana vilayet. During the war years, he was appointed mutasarrif of Burdur in the Konya vilayet, where he frequently opposed Young Turk directives concerning anti-Armenian measures.

19 Omar Fakhuri, later regarded as one of the pioneers of modern Lebanese literature, was invited by Faisal I of Iraq from Beirut to Damascus to edit the official gazette *Al-Asima*. Writing for this and other periodicals under the pseudonym "Democratic Islam," Fakhuri published numerous articles documenting the plight of Armenian refugees and advocating closer Arab–Armenian relations and mutual solidarity.

20 Salih Zahr Ad-Din, *'Asāla al Arab wa al 'Uqfa al Ārmani* [The Arabs' Gentry and the Armenians' Gratefulness] (Beirut, 2000), 326–327.

We all went and kissed the hem of his garment. He gave us an unexpected reception and said: “I know that the Armenians can rightly appreciate this movement of ours, because they, like us, have borne the bitter yoke of Turkish tyranny and, now deprived of their homes, are abandoned to famine and hunger; therefore, I recognize the Armenians as a liberty-loving people and invite them to cooperation.”²¹

Armenian deportees arriving in Damascus from Palestine, the Druze Mountains, and the Hauran frequently testified to the material, financial, and moral assistance provided through the efforts of Faisal.²² This support was at times accompanied by explicit gestures of political inclusion and solidarity. Faisal even suggested to a group of Armenians bound for Cairo that they accompany him to Damascus, stating: “If I enter the city in glory, you too shall enter it in glory with me.”²³ This symbolic gesture suggests that Faisal viewed the rehabilitation of the Armenian community not merely as a humanitarian obligation, but as an integral element of his broader vision for a unified and pluralistic Syrian state.

Faisal’s favorable attitude toward the Armenians was further demonstrated when he granted refuge to approximately one hundred Armenian deportees in a secure area on the outskirts of Damascus, providing a local Arab sheikh with the financial means and administrative authority necessary to ensure their protection and eventual transfer to the capital once conditions stabilized.

These efforts gradually attracted recognition beyond the regional sphere and were acknowledged by the international Armenian leadership. A notable example is a letter sent to Faisal in August 1918 by Boghos Nubar, in which the chairman of the Armenian National Delegation in Paris formally recognized Faisal’s protective role and humanitarian assistance toward Armenian deportees: “Thanks to the efforts of your valiant soldiers in southern Syria, the exiled sons and daughters of our nation have been reached. We pray for God’s blessing upon your army and for your victory to be enduring. Your soldiers bring added glory and honor to the Arab people; indeed, every Armenian, wherever they may be, stands in solidarity with the Arabs.”²⁴

In his reply, Faisal reaffirmed his support for the Armenian deportees and emphasized what he regarded as the moral and religious obligation of Arabs to assist the displaced:

21 Karapet Galfaian, *Գիրք ելից հայոց: Յիշատակ անշիրիմ նահատակաց հնոց և նորից, յայտից և անյայտից* [The Book of Armenian Exodus: In Memory of the Unburied Old and New, Known and Unknown Martyrs] (Beirut: Tōnikian, 1955), 421.

22 Allawi, *Faisal*, 132.

23 Eghishe bishop Chilinkirian, *Նկարագրությունք Երուսաղեմի-Հալեպի-Դամասկոսի զայլթականական և վանական զանազան դիպաց և անցքերու 1914-1918* [Descriptions of Miscellaneous Refugee and Monastic Incidents and Events in Jerusalem-Aleppo-Damascus, 1914-1918] (Jerusalem, 1927), 51.

24 Nora Arisian, *Aṣdā’ al-Ibāda al-Armaniyya fī al-Ṣaḥāfa al-Sūriyya (1877-1930)* [Echoes of the Armenian Genocide in Syrian Press 1877-1930] (Beirut: Az-Zaqira, 2004), 271-272.

Your letter to Emir Faisal is a sincere expression of friendship and goodwill. Indeed, the assistance provided by Emir Faisal to the exiles is a religious and moral duty incumbent upon every Arab. The Armenian people, and all others who suffer similar fates, are our allies in moments of both joy and sorrow. Above all, we pray to God to grant us the strength to extend a helping hand to the exiled, so that the true spirit of Islam and Muslim compassion may reach the entire world.²⁵

Emir Faisal's positive attitude toward Armenian refugees was also acknowledged by representatives of Armenian political circles. A group of Armenian youths in Damascus, including Aram Sahakyan, met with Faisal on several occasions.²⁶ In his memoirs, Sahakyan emphasized Faisal's sympathetic stance toward the Armenians, writing:

The Armenian people must remember King Faisal as a compassionate and sincere friend. Having a deep understanding of the Armenian people's values and contributions, he treated the scattered remnants of our nation with genuine care and unwavering respect. It is enough to recall his words: "After the Arab people, I consider the Armenian people my closest and most beloved."²⁷

This spirit of goodwill is further corroborated by the testimonies of Armenian ecclesiastics. Following the liberation of Syria in 1918, the transfer of power brought a broad political amnesty. Numerous Armenian political detainees were released alongside Arab nationalists previously imprisoned or condemned by the Ottoman authorities. Among them was Harutyun Yesayan, who had been arrested in June 1916 during a wider crackdown targeting more than sixty members of the Armenian community. Reflecting on these developments, Sahak II Khabayan wrote: "We were all released. A spirit of renewal filled the air... The community of 25,000-30,000 Armenian exiles has finally been able to breathe freely, thanks to the just governance of the Arab administration."²⁸

On the morning of 30 September 1918, after what he described as a restless and sleepless night, Sahak II Khabayan personally visited Emir Faisal. Upon greeting him, the Catholicos reportedly declared: "We are both joyful; we both are worthy of congratulations."²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., 272.

²⁶ In 1916, a group of Armenian youths in Damascus, including Aram Sahakyan, established a Dashnaksakan (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) committee aimed at maintaining contact with the Armenian diaspora and organizing assistance for Armenian refugees who had taken shelter in the Syrian desert. For a detailed account, see Aram Sahakian, «Դամասկոսէն մինչև Արապա (Յուշեր Մեծ Աղէտի օրերէն)» [From Damascus to Aqaba (Memoirs from the Days of the Great Catastrophe)], *Hayrenik* (Boston), 1950, no. 1: 21-33; no. 2: 73-85; no. 4: 56-66.

²⁷ Ibid., no. 4, 62.

²⁸ Yeghiayan, *Contemporary History*, 80.

²⁹ Byuzand Yeghiayan, *Ադանայի Հայոց պատմություն* [History of Armenians of Adana] (Antilias-Lebanon: Publication of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1970), 372.

The relationship between the Armenian ecclesiastical leadership and the emerging Arab administration was further strengthened through a series of meetings between Sahak II Khabayan and Emir Faisal. These high-level encounters resulted in repeated assurances of support and reflected the Syrian administration's intention to pursue a policy of protection and cooperation toward Armenian deportees.³⁰

During one such meeting, Faisal reflected on his nineteen years in Constantinople and expressed deep admiration for the Armenians' intellectual and socio-economic contributions. He reportedly stated: "I have long been impressed by the brilliance of the Armenian people and their development, as well as their exceptional abilities across all professions and crafts."³¹ Faisal further noted that some of his most "trusted and sincere" associates in the Ottoman capital had been Armenians. To illustrate this bond of trust, he recounted that while secretly fleeing Constantinople for Mecca, he had sought—and received—shelter in an Armenian household in order to evade the Ottoman authorities.³²

To mark the declaration of Arab independence, Faisal organized a reception at the offices of the influential Damascene newspaper *Al-Muqtabas*. Among the invited guests were Yeghishe Chilinkirian of the St. James Brotherhood of Jerusalem and Father Hovhannes, both of whom were received with particular respect and official recognition.³³

Institutionalizing Assistance for Armenian Deportees

Following Faisal's rise to power, assistance to Armenian deportees became increasingly institutionalized through formal decrees and administrative measures. A key indication of this emerging political framework was Faisal's first major political speech in Syria, delivered on 11 November 1918 at the Arab Club Hall in Aleppo. The address was particularly significant, as it articulated for the first time Faisal's vision for the future Arab state and his conception of Arab patriotism and nationalism.

Speaking before city officials and representatives of various communities, Faisal emphasized the importance of Arab unity (umma), arguing that it should be grounded in national identity rather than religious affiliation. He maintained that all religions fundamentally preached justice and the brotherhood of humanity, asserting that anyone seeking to sow division between Muslims, Christians, and Jews could not be considered a true Arab. For Faisal, justice constituted the central principle of governance, and he affirmed that all individuals were equal before the law regardless of their religious background.³⁴

30 Yeghiayan, *History of Armenians of Adana*, 95.

31 Chilinkirian, *Description*, 51.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 47.

34 Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1958), 48.

This inclusive vision was also reflected in symbolic public acts. While in Aleppo, Faisal attended, under his patronage and in the presence of Allied military officials and prominent Arab families, a concert performed by a choir composed of Armenian deportees. The ensemble had been organized through the efforts of the noted conductor and composer Barsegh Kanachyan, who sought to unite genocide survivors into a structured musical collective. The performance became both a powerful expression of Armenian cultural resilience and a symbolic embodiment of the inclusive civic ethos promoted by the emerging Arab administration.³⁵ By publicly supporting the event, Faisal incorporated the cultural expression of Armenian survivors into the civic life of post-Ottoman Syria and further strengthened the developing ties between the Armenian and Arab communities.

The Aleppo demonstration of 4 December 1918 stands as an important indicator of the changing political environment for Armenian survivors in the aftermath of World War I. The participation of approximately 50,000 Armenian deportees reflected their capacity to reorganize themselves as a visible and collective communal body after years of persecution and displacement. Equally significant was the fact that such a large-scale public gathering could only have taken place with the explicit approval of the Arab authorities, signaling a clear shift toward a policy of protection and support for the Armenian population. During the demonstration, Armenian participants formulated a seven-point memorandum of demands calling for the punishment of the Turkish authorities and the restoration of historical justice for the Armenian people, which was subsequently submitted to the Armenian National Delegation in Paris.³⁶

This evolving approach soon found more concrete administrative expression. Ali Nasser, a close associate of Emir Faisal, was appointed commander of the Arab forces in northern Syria and later became a senior commander in Faisal's Northern Arab Army. In December 1918, accompanied by the garrison commander Ali Cevdet,³⁷ he traveled to Aleppo, where he initiated measures to formalize the distribution of material aid and relief supplies to Armenian deportees, thereby incorporating humanitarian assistance into the responsibilities of the regional military administration.

Ali Nasser later met in an official capacity with Ashtchian and Father Yeghise Ayvazyan. According to their testimonies, the commander received them with “notable warmth” and outlined his intention to gather Armenian deportees for transfer to Aleppo.

35 S. Seza, «Դրվագներ Բ. Կանաչեանի կեանքէն» [Episodes from the life of B. Kanachyan], *Nairi* (Beirut), 1957, no. 35, 5, 15; *Բարսեղ Կանաչեան. կեանքի մը երաժշտացումը (1885-1967)* [Barsegh Kanachian: Musification of Life], ed. Antranik Dakessian (Beirut: Vahe Setian, Haygazian press, 2017), 320.

36 «Հայկաի Հայկական Միութեան Ա. Շաժում» [The Armenian Union Movement A. of Aleppo], *Hay Dzayn* (Aleppo), 6 December, 1918.

37 Ali Cevdet, a former Ottoman officer and early participant in the Arab Revolt, later commanded Syrian forces in the Beqaa Valley and subsequently served as a provincial governor and minister under Faisal I of Iraq. At the beginning of World War I, Ali Cevdet was also among the founding members of the “Armenian-Arab Brotherhood” society established in Cairo to promote Armenian–Arab cooperation, alongside Mushegh Serobian and Boghos Nubar. See «Հայ արաբական յարաբերութիւնն» [Armenian-Arab Relations], *Hay Dzayn*, 15 February 1919.

Importantly, Nasser pledged to facilitate the relocation through vehicles and logistical resources provided directly by the Arab administration.³⁸ In addition, Nasser issued formal instructions to the local governor, Haydar Bey, ordering the systematic distribution of grain supplies to Armenian deportees in Manbij.³⁹ Through this measure, the support and sustenance of Armenian survivors became incorporated into the official responsibilities of the regional administration.

This evolving administrative framework also helps explain why, in late 1918 and early 1919, senior Syrian officials repeatedly addressed the condition of Armenian deportees in formal governmental settings. On 20 December 1918, Harutyun Yesayan met with Military Governor of Aleppo Shukri al-Ayubi and Ali Rida Pasha. During the meeting, al-Rikabi reaffirmed the administration's support, declaring: "We are firmly convinced that the Armenians possess a legitimate right to existence, and we shall not refrain from fulfilling every fraternal obligation, particularly in light of our shared suffering."⁴⁰ Such statements transformed Armenian relief from a purely humanitarian concern into a recognized state responsibility grounded in principles of intercommunal solidarity.

In response to expressions of gratitude from the Armenian clergy, Shukri Pasha al-Ayubi assured them that additional administrative assistance would be provided as circumstances allowed.⁴¹ Harutyun Yesayan also met with Tawfiq Shami Bey, a senior diplomatic official, who reaffirmed that Armenian deportees in Syria were under the direct protection and patronage of the Syrian authorities.⁴² These exchanges culminated on 21 December 1918 in a reciprocal visit by Arab officials to the Armenian Prelacy. During the meeting, Ali Rida al-Rikabi reiterated that the Armenian community could rely upon the goodwill and support of the Arab population.

During the same discussions, Father Harutyun formally requested the punishment of Nazmi Bey for his brutal treatment of children in the Aleppo orphanage.⁴³ In response, Ali Rida promptly ordered his arrest and punishment, demonstrating the willingness of the new administration not only to express solidarity with Armenian survivors but also

38 «Աշնեան քնյ. Եզնիկ, Այվազեան քնյ. Եղիսէ. Ն. Բ. Շէրիֆ Նասրը եւ Մէնսպունի հայերը» [Father Yeznik Ashjian, Father Yeghise Ayyazian – His Highness Sharif Nasir and the Armenians of Manbij], *Hay Dzayn*, 16 December, 1918.

39 Ibid.

40 «Սիրալիր յարաբերութիւն հայ եւ արաբ ազգերու» [Cordial Relations Between the Armenian and Arab Nations], *Hay Dzayn*, 23 December, 1918.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 The authorities in Aleppo adopted a brutal policy toward Armenian orphans by appointing Nazmi Bey as director of the city's orphanage, where children were subjected to systematic abuse and death. Following the entry of British forces into Aleppo, Nazmi was arrested after protests lodged by the Armenian Prelacy. During his interrogation, it emerged that of the approximately 3,000 orphans transferred to the institution, only fifty had survived. Nazmi reportedly admitted that he had intentionally spared those fifty children in order to preserve the appearance of a functioning orphanage and thereby continue receiving his salary and food rations. See Aram Antonian, *Մեծ ոճիրը: Հայկական վերջին կոտորածները եւ Թալէադ փաշա* [The Great crime. The Last Massacres of Armenians and Talaat Pasha] (Boston: Pahak Printing House, 1921), 185.

to exercise its authority in addressing abuses committed against them.⁴⁴

These measures were followed by additional administrative concessions aimed at facilitating the integration and protection of Armenian deportees within the emerging Syrian state structure. In early January 1919, during consultations between Ali Rida al-Rikabi and representatives of the Armenian community in Aleppo, Yeghishe Chilinkirian submitted a formal petition requesting that state authorities recognize and accept administrative documents written also in Armenian.⁴⁵ The request was approved, constituting a notable acknowledgment of communal linguistic rights and illustrating the Arab administration's broader attempt to accommodate the administrative integration of Armenian deportees within the emerging state framework.

This atmosphere of growing institutional recognition and cooperation was also reflected in the increasingly public participation of Armenians in the civic and political life of postwar Aleppo. On 20 January 1919, the Armenian leadership in Aleppo organized a large commemorative procession involving nearly ten thousand Armenians. The procession moved from the Cathedral of the Forty Martyrs to the Armenian cemetery and included prayers led by Father Bardughimeos of Furnuz (Zeytun). The afternoon gathering at the cathedral developed into a significant diplomatic occasion attended by French, British, and American military and diplomatic representatives, transforming the communal act of mourning into a broader appeal for international recognition and justice. The ceremony was attended by the full Aleppo City Council and senior regional officials, including Shukri Pasha al-Ayubi, Ali Nasser, Garrison Commander Ali Cevdet, and Chief of Staff Ziyad. Speeches were delivered by Hakob Voskan, chairman of the Protestant assembly, and Azniv Chilian. The gathering also featured addresses by Rizkallah Kneider and Paul Poret, editors of the Aleppine newspapers *At-Taqqaddum* and *Renaissance*, reflecting strong intellectual and journalistic support for the Armenian cause among segments of the local Arab elite.⁴⁶

These developments unfolded alongside broader diplomatic and humanitarian cooperation between the Armenian and Arab leaderships at the international level. In Paris on 12 December 1918, Faisal met with Boghos Nubar to coordinate relief efforts for Armenian deportees throughout Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. During the discussions, Faisal accepted financial assistance collected by Armenian diaspora communities in Manchester and Marseille. These funds were allocated to the Syrian authorities for the distribution of medical and food aid in Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut, thereby formalizing a transnational humanitarian partnership between Arab and Armenian institutions.⁴⁷

44 "Cordial Relations Between the Armenian and Arab Nations," *Hay Dzayn*, 23 December, 1918.

45 Chilinkirian, *Description*, 66.

46 «Համազգային սգահանդէսը 1919 Յունվար 20» [The Great National Mourning Event of January 20, 1919], *Hay Dzayn*, 24 January 1919; Aramian, «Սգահանդէսին պատմական օրը» [The Historic Day of the National Mourning Ceremony], *Hay Dzayn*, 25 January 1919; «Համազգային սգահանդէս Հալէպի մէջ» [The Great National Mourning Event in Aleppo], *Arev*, 29 January 1919; Harutyun Marutyan, *Commemorating the Armenian Genocide* (London, New York, Oxford: I.B. Tauris, 2026), 63-64.

47 Yervand Najaryan, «Հայ-արաբական փոխհարաբերությունները Սիրիայում (1918 հոկտեմբեր-1919

In parallel with these diplomatic and humanitarian actions, practical mechanisms were being implemented at the local level, aimed at improving the living conditions of the deportees and facilitating their economic integration. Within this very context, In February 1919, the Syrian administration issued a decree authorizing monthly food rations for approximately 48,000 Armenian deportees. By explicitly attributing their displacement to the policies of the “former government”—that is, the Young Turk regime—the decree framed humanitarian assistance as a form of political and moral restitution. The document stated: “While the state budget cannot fully accommodate the comprehensive needs of the 48,000 deportees displaced by the former regime’s decisions, it is nonetheless imperative to proceed with a systematic distribution of sustenance. We must ensure that the most destitute among them receive the necessary provisions without delay.”⁴⁸

The Armenian press also petitioned Faisal regarding a moratorium on the debts of Armenian merchants in Aleppo. The resulting resolution, ratified on 26 March 1919, established that:

1. All financial obligations owed by Armenians would be deferred until the end of 1919, with repayment to occur in four later installments.
2. Armenian debtors seeking to emigrate were required to provide formal guarantees concerning their liabilities; without such documentation, departure would not be permitted.⁴⁹

This resolution enabled Armenian merchants to stabilize their financial situation while simultaneously serving as a strategic mechanism through which Emir Faisal sought to integrate the Armenian community into the socio-economic structure of the emerging Syrian state. The deferment of debts protected small-scale traders from insolvency, while the restrictions on emigration aimed to prevent capital flight and encourage the economic reintegration of Armenians into the new administration.

Thus, these developments indicate that assistance to Armenian deportees under Faisal’s administration evolved from immediate relief efforts into a more coherent administrative policy. The protection, accommodation, and socio-economic stabilization of Armenian survivors became intertwined with the broader processes of governance and state formation in post-Ottoman Syria, reflecting both pragmatic administrative concerns and a political vision of intercommunal coexistence.

հոնիսի) [Armenian-Arab relations in Syria (October 1918-June 1919)], *Oriental Studies Collection* 6 (1974): 158.

48 Published in the Syrian government’s official newspaper, *Al-Asima*, on 27 February 1919. See Arisian, *Echoes*, 354.

49 The resolution was published in the 8 April 1919 issue of *Al-Asima*. See Arisian, *Echoes*, 356-357.

The Stance of Faisal's Administration on the Recovery of Armenian Women and Children

The recovery of Armenian women and children occupied a distinct place within Faisal's broader policy toward Armenian Genocide survivors. Beyond immediate humanitarian relief, this issue addressed the enduring consequences of genocide, including forced assimilation, religious conversion, and the fragmentation of Armenian families and communities. Faisal's administration increasingly approached the matter as one of state responsibility, as reflected in formal decrees, the mobilization of provincial authorities, and support for Armenian-led recovery initiatives, though implementation remained constrained by local resistance and political instability.

In 1919, a series of important resolutions were adopted in Syria that played a significant role in the recovery and reintegration of Armenian women and children. In January 1919, Emir Faisal issued a formal executive order entitled "Decree of Emir Faisal regarding the Restitution and Rights of Armenian Women." The decree declared:

We have formally directed the Military Governor of Aleppo, Jafar Pasha, to enact a public decree mandating that all individuals harboring Armenian women, girls, or children must immediately return them to their communal representatives. Any refusal to comply with this repatriation effort shall result in severe legal penalties. The primary objective of this mandate is the systematic identification and recovery of these survivors; those who facilitate their return shall merit my highest personal and official regard.⁵⁰

To ensure the implementation of this mandate, Faisal dispatched official instructions to provincial governors, local administrators, and Harutyun Yesayan. In response to these directives, Jafar al-Askari, Military Governor of the Aleppo region, issued a formal declaration stating: "It is an honor to acknowledge the sovereign directive of His Majesty Emir Faisal regarding the restitution of Armenian orphans, women, and girls. The mandate has been disseminated through the relevant press organs, and rigorous administrative measures are being instituted to ensure the comprehensive implementation of the order."⁵¹

These administrative mandates and official commitments were subsequently reinforced through direct meetings, which allowed the Armenian leadership to engage with the Arab authorities at the highest level to address pressing concerns. In early June 1919, Faisal, accompanied by Jafar al-Askari, Military Governor of Aleppo Province, visited Aleppo, where Sahak II Khabayan organized a formal reception in his honor at the Armenian

⁵⁰ *Ṣafahāt Wathā'iqiyya min Jarīdat al-Taḡaddum al-Ḥalabiyya 'an al-Aḥwāl al-Armaniyya wa-l-'Arabiyya fī al-Dawla al-'Uthmāniyya wa-l-Bilād al-Shāmiyya* [Documentary materials from the Aleppine newspaper al-Taḡaddum on the conditions of Armenians and Arabs in the Ottoman Empire and Syria] (Aleppo: Dar al-Atlas, 1992), 324.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Prelacy.⁵² The gathering became an important diplomatic forum for addressing Armenian communal concerns in the postwar period. During the reception, Gabriel Gasparyan presented a formal petition to Faisal concerning Armenian women and children who remained dispersed among Arab communities in Iraq and Syria. The petition stated: “A large number of women, girls, and boys, deported from their homeland as a result of forced exile, currently remain among the marginalized and impoverished Arab populations of Iraq and Syria. The return of these unfortunate individuals is not only a pressing concern for their families and for the Armenian nation but also a humanitarian imperative and an inalienable right.”⁵³

In response to this appeal, the delegation urged Faisal to reaffirm and more broadly disseminate the proclamation issued in April 1918 by his father, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, which had called for the protection of Armenian refugees and the restoration of their civil rights. Underscoring the moral and political significance of the request, the delegation declared: “We ask that you resolve this issue once and for all, thereby ensuring your legacy among the many benevolent actions attributed to your leadership.”⁵⁴ Gabriel Gasparyan concluded his address in Arabic, in a symbolic gesture of Armenian-Arab solidarity, stating: “The Armenian and Arab peoples, hand in hand, have fought side by side against the forces of tyranny, oppression, and subjugation.”⁵⁵

During his visit Faisal also personally visited the Armenian orphanage in Aleppo’s Ram district, which at the time operated under French supervision. The visit carried important symbolic significance, projecting Faisal’s authority as a protector of the Armenians even within institutions administered by foreign powers. During the visit, he directly reassured the orphaned children of continued Arab protection and support.⁵⁶

The systematic recovery of Armenian deportees was facilitated through cooperation between Armenian rescue initiatives and segments of the Arab elite. Supported by Zaki Bey, a close associate of Faisal, and by the Druze leader Hussein al-Atrash, these efforts were able to navigate the instability of the postwar transitional period.⁵⁷ According to one testimony, Sheikh Hussein al-Atrash sent a delegation to escort Armenian representatives to his residence. After reading Faisal’s letter, he reportedly declared: “We will do everything possible for the safety and freedom of Armenians. We will sacrifice everything.”⁵⁸

On 25 June 1919, Faisal issued a formal decree authorizing the transportation of Armenian refugees, a measure that significantly facilitated ongoing rescue and recovery

52 Chilinkirian, *Descriptions*, 49.

53 «Էմիր Ֆեյսալ Հայկաի մէջ, հայ որբերն ու կիները վերադարձնելու հրաման» [Emir Faisal in Aleppo: The Decree for the Return of Armenian Orphans and Women], *Kilikia*, 27 July 1919.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 *The documentary material*, 323.

57 *Crows of the Desert: Memoirs of Levon Yotnakhparian*, ed. Levon Parian (Tujunga, CA: Parian Photographic Design, 2012), 65.

58 Ibid., 82-83.

operations involving deportees, particularly women and children. At the initiative of Levon Yotnakhparian, copies of the order were circulated throughout the Hauran region to ensure compliance by local authorities. The decree stated: “Mr. Levon Yotnakhparian is hereby granted permission to transfer all Armenians from the Hauran region and surrounding areas to Dera’a or Damascus via train station, free of charge. No one should stop them.”⁵⁹ Subsequently, around four thousand Armenians were relocated to the tent camp in Damascus.⁶⁰

This directive effectively guaranteed Armenian deportees access to regional railway infrastructure and authorized their free movement to Dera’a or Damascus under the protection of the Arab administration, thereby creating an official mechanism for the recovery and relocation of survivors. According to publications of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), Levon Yotnakhparian remained a central figure in these operations. Working alongside Karapet Kavafian, Hovhannes Kavafian, Yesayi Kereshekian, and his brother Tigran Yotnakhparian, he coordinated the difficult process of locating, recovering, and rehabilitating Armenian orphans. Contemporary accounts described their efforts in stark terms: “From one village to another, from one home to another, we were collecting Armenian orphans and sending them to orphanages or refugee shelters in Damascus.”⁶¹

The same sources further note that the Yotnakhparian expedition carried out an additional rescue mission near Hauran, transferring approximately twenty Armenian orphans to the AGBU orphanages in Damascus.⁶²

In his memoirs, Levon Yotnakhparian recounts another meeting with Faisal, during which the mission to recover Armenian orphans from Arab households and restore them to the Armenian community in order to preserve their identity and heritage was presented. Faisal approved the initiative, issued an official decree in support of these efforts, and ensured that the order was publicized in the Arab press. According to Yotnakhparian, the decree stated: “Whoever has Armenian orphans must surrender them to the committee headed by Mr. Levon Yotnakhparian.”⁶³

The governors of Aleppo and Damascus were instructed to provide full assistance to those involved in the rescue operations. Faisal’s decree was subsequently published in numerous Armenian and Arab newspapers. The newspaper *Kilikia*, for example, reported: “Given the decision to rescue Armenians, those sheltering Armenian deportees in their homes are required to inform the municipal police so that their names may be officially registered on a special list. Anyone who, after this announcement, continues to conceal a deportee will be subject to legal prosecution.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid., 83, 91.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁶¹ Ibid., 97.

⁶² «Ազատագրուած հայերը» [The rescued Armenians], *Miutun* (Cairo), July-August, 1919, 51.

⁶³ *Crows of the Desert*, 98.

⁶⁴ «Հայերու ներգաղթը» [Armenian immigration], *Kilikia*, 23 May, 1919.

Yotnakhparian also noted that because of protests and unrest in Damascus, Faisal eventually requested that the orphan recovery operations be temporarily suspended, forcing the organizers to halt what he described as their “noble mission” after rescuing large numbers of children.⁶⁵

Activists such as Ruben Heryan and Parnak Shishikyan worked closely with Arab tribal leaders in support of the efforts to recover Armenian women and children.⁶⁶

Faisal’s intervention contributed to the rescue of thousands of Armenians who, after 1915, had been absorbed into Arab and Kurdish households, thereby creating opportunities for many survivors to reclaim their Armenian identity. Nevertheless, the reunification of women and children with their families remained a complex and often painful process.

The February 1919 Crisis and Its Aftermath

While Faisal consistently pursued a policy aimed at improving Armenian–Syrian Arab relations, the events of 28 February 1919 stood in stark contrast to the official policies promoted by his administration. The violence in Aleppo appears to reflect the tensions between the government’s broader conciliatory approach toward the Armenians and opposition from local actors within the fragile postwar transitional environment. On Friday, 28 February, violent attacks were carried out against the Armenian refugee population in Aleppo, resulting in significant casualties among a community composed entirely of genocide survivors and deportees.⁶⁷

The atmosphere in Aleppo had been growing increasingly tense in the weeks preceding the violence. The newspaper *Kilikia*, published in Adana, reported: “On Friday morning, February 28, at 6 o’clock, the massacre against the Armenians began from Jümma Pazarı, the location designated for the meeting previously announced by the Al Arab club and prohibited by the Entente authorities. Within an extremely short period of time, it spread to nearly all parts of the city.”⁶⁸ Eyewitness Aram Antonyan similarly recalled that on February 28, Muslim Arabs in Aleppo, encouraged by the Arab government and joined by Arab police officers and gendarmes, launched a large-scale attack against Armenians.⁶⁹

Some Arab eyewitnesses attributed the outbreak of violence to an alleged theft by Armenians in the Al-Jumaa market, a story that quickly spread across the city until British

⁶⁵ Ibid., 112–113.

⁶⁶ Narine Margaryan, «Միջագետքի անապատի հայ որբախույզները (1918–1923 թթ.)» [The Armenian Orphan-Seekers of the Mesopotamian Desert (1918–1923)], *Armenological Issues Bulletin* 1, no. 13 (2018): 39–57.

⁶⁷ For details see «Հալեպի ջարդը» [The Aleppo Massacre], *Veratsnund* (Paris), 15 April 1919, 123–124; «Հալեպի կոտորածը» [The Aleppo Massacre], *Kilikia*, 14 March, 1919; Ali Sultan, *History of Syria*, 114; Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 218; Hovhannes Topuzyan, *Սիրիայի և Լիբանանի հայկական գաղթաբնակների պատմություն (1841–1946)* [History of the Armenian Diasporas in Syria and Lebanon (1841–1946)] (Yerevan: Armenian SSR AS publication, 1974), 214–220; Kamil ibn Husayn Al-Ghazzi, *Nahr al-Dhahab fī Tārīkh Ḥalab* [The River of Gold in the History of Aleppo], Book 3 (Aleppo: Maronite Press 1923), 721–725.

⁶⁸ «Հալեպի կոտորածը» [The Aleppo Massacre], *Kilikia* (Adana), 14 March, 1919.

⁶⁹ Aram Antonyan, “The Aleppo Massacre,” *Veradzenount* (Paris), 15 April 1919, no. 8, 123–124.

and French intervention prevented further escalation. Yet contemporary newspapers from Aleppo and Cilicia suggest that the violence had been preceded by a sustained atmosphere of hostility. A key source of tension was an article titled “The Armenian and the Arab,” published in early February in *Al-Arab* by its editor-in-chief Sami al-Sarraj after his visit to Adana.⁷⁰ The article advanced inflammatory accusations, claiming that Armenian parties and armed groups were persecuting and killing Arabs returning from Turkey.⁷¹

The Armenian press responded swiftly. *Taragir* was among the first to reject these allegations, followed by *Hay Dzayn*, which emphasized on February 23 that Armenians had expressed only gratitude toward the Arab government and people, sentiments that had resonated even abroad.⁷² On the eve of the violence, H. Aramyan, writing in *Hay Dzayn* under the title “*Armenian-Arab Brotherhood*,” warned readers not to fall prey to “the disgraceful intrigues of the Ittihadists,” urging Armenians and Arabs instead to seek mutual understanding and solidarity.⁷³

Scholars have proposed multiple explanations for the Aleppo massacres, pointing to political, economic, and social tensions. However, the most convincing interpretation identifies Turkish actors as the principal instigators, while recognizing that a full understanding of the events also requires consideration of the roles played by Arab, British, and French authorities.

Contemporary accounts provide varying casualty figures. The 12 March 1919 issue of the newspaper *Kilikia* reported 46 deaths and 85 injuries. In its 16 March issue, under the headline “The Massacre of Aleppo,” the newspaper, citing a medical bulletin, revised the figures to 51 dead and approximately 100 wounded, while noting that the number of missing remained unknown. The French press likewise reported on the events, stating that the Armenians suffered approximately 50 deaths and 150 injuries in less than an hour.⁷⁴

As the violence escalated, the Armenian barracks were besieged, and the Armenian orphanage in Aleppo also came under attack. Notably, the orphaned youths defended the institution for more than two hours, armed only with wooden rifles, underscoring both the desperation of the situation and the vulnerability of Armenian survivors, including children. In response to petitions submitted by the Armenian Prelacy, the British authorities established a special military tribunal to investigate the massacres. Nearly one hundred individuals implicated in the violence were arrested, numerous officials who had perpetrated or facilitated the attacks were dismissed from their posts, and thirty-five individuals were sentenced to death. Some perpetrators were reportedly pursued and held accountable even beyond the borders of Syria.⁷⁵

70 In the autumn of 1918, the society *Nadi al-Arab* (“Arab Club”) was founded by Arab Unionists (Ittihadists). Its official organ was the daily newspaper *Al-Arab*.

71 «Հալեպի կոտորածը» [The Aleppo Massacre], *Kilikia* (Adana), 14 March, 1919.

72 «Հայ արաբական յարաբերութիւնն» [Armenian-Arab Relations], *Hay Dzayn*, 23 February, 1919.

73 Ibid.

74 *L'illustration* (Paris), 5 April 1919.

75 «Կեանքը Հալեպի մէջ» [Life in Aleppo], *Kilikia*, 23 May, 1919; «Մահու պատիժ Հալեպի մէջ» [Executions in Aleppo], *Kilikia*, 17 June, 1919.

While attending the Paris Peace Conference, Faisal publicly condemned the incident, rejecting any characterization of the violence as representative of Arab policy or society. In a telegram addressed to his brother Zeid, he wrote: “This was committed out of ignorance, enmity, and for despicable motives. Such incidents will not succeed in the future. They were instigated by enemy agents.”⁷⁶

In the aftermath of the Aleppo violence, Faisal appears to have reaffirmed and strengthened his policy of conciliation toward ethnic and religious minorities, with particular attention to the Armenian deportees. This position was formally articulated in an address delivered at the Damascus Palace on 9 May 1919, in which he emphasized the responsibility of the emerging Syrian state to protect the civil rights and collective welfare of minority communities while preserving stable intercommunal relations.⁷⁷

Faisal’s speech also underscored the strategic importance of establishing a representative political order capable of securing international recognition. Within this framework, the protection of minorities was presented not merely as a moral obligation, but as a defining feature of legitimate statehood. As Faisal declared, “Greater commitment must be dedicated to the rights and requirements of minorities in order to rectify the systemic injustices and entrenched hostilities inherited from the Ottoman era.”⁷⁸ Addressing his audience, he further emphasized:

We are obliged to demonstrate to our Allies that we are a nation striving for independence—a nation committed to the protection of our elders, our children, our brothers and sisters, and our neighbors. We extend our respect to all who arrive in our country with the intent of working alongside us. I appeal to you with a special plea: let us unite. This unity is not only our collective duty but the sole foundation upon which all our future endeavors must be built.⁷⁹

Following Faisal’s address, the Armenian Prelate delivered a reciprocal speech expressing the Armenian community’s gratitude for the assistance and protection provided by the Arab population during the war years. He declared: “I convey my deepest gratitude to the Arab nation for their unwavering assistance and compassion throughout the tribulations of the past four years. These noble deeds shall be inscribed in golden letters within the annals of our shared history.”⁸⁰

Faisal’s declaration carried particular significance for Armenian survivors in Syria, as it publicly acknowledged their communal, religious, and national identity within the political

⁷⁶ Sultan, *History of Syria*, 114.

⁷⁷ Arab historian Ali Sultan records the date of the meeting as 5 May. For the complete text of the announcement, see Sultan, *History of Syria*, 431-442.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 440.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 441-442.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 440.

framework of the emerging Syrian state. His position reflected not merely sympathy toward the Armenian cause, but a deliberate political effort to stabilize Armenian–Arab relations and institutionalize cooperation through directives encouraging local authorities to maintain constructive relations with the Armenian population.

Armenian–Arab cooperation was further institutionalized through the establishment of the Armenian–Arab Friendship Committee in November 1919.⁸¹ Formed at the initiative of the Arab Council of Elders, the committee sought to counter what were described as “troubling rumors” circulating in Aleppo following the withdrawal of British forces and to prevent the reemergence of intercommunal tensions. Its broader objective was to transform the political rapprochement achieved at the leadership level into a more durable framework of social coexistence.

During the committee’s inaugural meeting, presided over by the Military Governor of Aleppo, Jafar al-Askari, Naji al-Suwaidi delivered a significant address on intercommunal coexistence and mutual reassurance. He declared: “Armenians and Arabs can be assured that no harm will come to them from one another... An Armenian can sleep peacefully in his home without fearing Islam.”⁸² Reflecting on the violence of 28 February 1919, al-Suwaidi characterized the events as a shared tragedy. While acknowledging that Armenians had been the principal victims of the massacres, he also referred to the imprisonment and execution of Arabs in Sudan, framing the violence within a broader context of political unrest and emphasizing the administration’s determination to prevent any recurrence. His remarks were warmly received, and he was subsequently elected chairman of the Armenian–Arab Friendship Committee.

According to the testimony of the orphan Hovakim Dishdishian,⁸³ “Caliph” addressed the children directly in the presence of the assembled dignitaries in order to reassure

81 Reflecting on the origins of the Armenian–Arab Friendship Committee, Mikael Natanyan wrote in the newspaper *Arev* (4 April 1924) that, once the shock of the “foreign-provoked” violence of February 1919 had subsided, Armenian and Arab elites sought to establish a formal mechanism capable of preventing renewed intercommunal conflict. This effort resulted in the formation of the Armenian–Arab Friendship Committee, an organization intended to overcome what were described as “involuntary misunderstandings” and to strengthen historical ties through active cooperation and advocacy. The committee, chaired by Naji Bey, included senior officials such as the Chief of Police and members of the influential Jabri family, underscoring its official and political significance. Natanyan further emphasized the committee’s effectiveness during the turbulent transition to French rule, describing it as an important platform through which Armenians expressed gratitude for the assistance they had received while reaffirming their commitment to contributing to the prosperity of Syria as their new homeland.

82 «Հայ եւ արաբ համերաշխ յարաբերութիւնները Հալէպի մէջ» [Armenian–Arab Relations of Solidarity in Aleppo], *Kilikia*, 30 November 1919.

83 Hovakim Dishdishian was born in 1906 in Zile, Sebastia Province. A survivor of the Armenian Genocide, he was the sole member of his family to escape and subsequently endured the hardships of the deportation routes through Arab and Kurdish regions. In Deir ez-Zor, he encountered Ruben Heryan, a dedicated rescuer and vorpakhuyz (orphan-seeker), engaged in locating Armenian children sheltered among Arab tribes. Heryan explained his rescue mission to Hovakim and offered to photograph him in the hope of facilitating his possible adoption in the United States. After leaving Deir ez-Zor, Hovakim eventually reached Aleppo, where he was admitted to the orphanage directed by Reverend A. Shirachian. See Hovakim Dishdishian, *Դէպ Զորի անապատներում* [In the Deserts of Deir ez-Zor] (Yerevan: Gututyun, 2006), 252–253.

them of the administration's protection. He reportedly attributed the February violence to Turkish provocation rather than Arab hostility and, invoking the shared suffering of Arabs and Armenians under Ottoman rule, pledged that such incidents would not recur. He further affirmed the continued support of the Arab administration for Armenian deportees and orphans. The decision to hold the gathering within the orphanage itself likely carried symbolic significance, particularly given reports of increased escape attempts by orphaned children in the aftermath of the Aleppo violence.

By late 1919, Armenian-Arab relations in Syria had achieved a relative degree of institutional stability. Although isolated incidents of violence and localized tensions persisted, they no longer appeared capable of fundamentally destabilizing the broader framework of intercommunal relations that had gradually emerged in the postwar period.

Geopolitical Realignments and the Limits of Armenian-Arab Cooperation

Faisal's rule in Syria was nevertheless shaped by persistent diplomatic and internal challenges. His administration struggled to secure international recognition and some meaningful form of Syrian independence while simultaneously confronting domestic tensions, particularly the rivalry between urban notables and Arab nationalist circles. These developments unfolded within the broader context of renewed Great Power competition in the Middle East, where the fate of post-Ottoman territories remained deeply contested.⁸⁴

In this environment, minority populations became central to the regional strategies of both Great Britain and France. The Allied powers sought to secure the cooperation of former Ottoman subjects in pursuit of their geopolitical objectives, frequently invoking the language of "minority protection" within broader imperial and diplomatic agendas. As one scholar has observed, "For various actors, the arrival and settlement of refugees in the mandate territories offered a means of resolving these fundamental uncertainties: during the mandate period and beyond, the modern state of Syria was formed around and against refugees."⁸⁵

For the Armenian population in Syria, the postwar period was marked by profound political uncertainty. Following the Armistice of Mudros, shifting priorities among the Great Powers reopened questions concerning the future of Armenian deportees. Encouraged by French promises regarding the possible establishment of an autonomous or independent Armenian entity in Cilicia, many refugees repatriated with renewed

⁸⁴ Murat Abus, "Imperial politics and Feisal's Arab Government in Syria, 1918-1920," *Journal of Historical Studies* 2 (2004): 55.

⁸⁵ Benjamin Thomas White, "Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920-1939," *Past & Present* 235, no. 1 (2017): 143-144.

expectations. This movement was not merely humanitarian in character but reflected broader geopolitical calculations. By redirecting Armenian survivors toward Cilicia, the French administration sought to reduce the likelihood of prolonged social and political tensions in Syria, where the permanent settlement of large numbers of deportees was perceived as potentially destabilizing. At the same time, French policymakers viewed the Armenian population in Cilicia as a potentially loyal demographic and political base that could reinforce French claims to a regional mandate.

These shifting alignments unfolded against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire's military collapse. Following his appointment in August 1918, Mustafa Kemal attempted to establish the Taurus Mountains as a final defensive line against the Allied advance. The Armistice of Mudros, however, rendered this strategy largely obsolete in the face of Anglo-French occupation and accelerated the reconfiguration of political power across the region.

By 1 November 1919, a decisive geopolitical shift occurred as British forces in western Syria began withdrawing in favor of French troops. This pragmatic hierarchy was most notably encapsulated by British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who remarked: "For us, the friendship of France is worth ten Syrias."⁸⁶

On 21 November 1919, the appointment of Henri Gouraud as High Commissioner of Syria and Commander-in-Chief of French forces in the Near East marked a significant escalation in the struggle over Syria's political future. In response, the Syrian Congress intensified its public opposition to French colonial ambitions and moved toward greater internal mobilization. Within this context, a national conscription law was enacted on 21 December 1919, requiring men between the ages of twenty and forty to enlist—a measure that generated considerable anxiety among Armenian deportees, whose political and legal status remained unresolved.⁸⁷

By early 1920, reports had reached Sahak II Khabayan in Damascus and Aleppo indicating that Armenian refugees might be included in the general mobilization. Concerned by this possibility, the Catholicos submitted a formal petition to Faisal on 7 February, requesting that Armenian conscription be postponed until the international status of the refugees had been clarified. Praising Faisal's prior support and benevolence, he argued that both the question of military service and the broader issue of Armenian civil rights should remain suspended pending the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference.⁸⁸

Concerned that the issue of conscription might undermine Armenian-Arab relations, Catholicos Sahak also reached out to Poghos Nubar Pasha in an effort to secure a favorable resolution. In practice, however, the military conscription law was never effectively enforced, even among the Arab population, and consequently had no direct impact on the Armenians.⁸⁹ The measure remained largely dormant until after the San Remo

⁸⁶ Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 221.

⁸⁷ Yeghiayan, *Contemporary History*, 96.

⁸⁸ Amin Said, *Восстания арабов в XXв.* [Arab Uprisings in the 20th Century] (Moscow: Progress, 1964), 86.

⁸⁹ Yeghiayan, *Contemporary History*, 96.

Conference, when the Hashemite Arab government began taking preliminary steps toward implementation through the establishment of administrative structures and the allocation of financial resources necessary to facilitate mobilization.

These mounting political tensions culminated on 8 March 1920, when the Syrian General Congress—convened in part to present a unified political front before the Inter-Allied Commission of Inquiry—formally proclaimed Syria's full independence as a constitutional monarchy under King Faisal.⁹⁰ This unilateral declaration represented a strategic attempt to preempt the decisions of the forthcoming San Remo Conference, at which the Allied powers were expected to finalize the post-Ottoman mandate system.

In July 1920, the Syrian political crisis reached its culmination. On 14 July, France issued an ultimatum demanding Faisal's formal acceptance of the French mandate and the suppression of anti-French resistance. Despite the Syrian General Congress's final reaffirmation of sovereignty on 19 July, Faisal's concessions proved insufficient to avert military confrontation. On 24 July, French forces decisively defeated the Arab army at the Battle of Maysalun, leading to the occupation of Damascus the following day. By early August, Faisal had been permanently expelled from Syria, and a new administration under Ala al-Din al-Darubi was installed to facilitate the consolidation of French mandatory rule and the dissolution of the national army.⁹¹

France's consolidation of its position in the region was accompanied by a strategic diplomatic realignment with Mustafa Kemal's nationalist movement, culminating in the 1921 Treaty of Ankara (Franklin-Bouillon Agreement). Under its terms, France recognized Turkish sovereignty over Cilicia and committed to a complete military withdrawal. By formalizing the Turco-Syrian frontier, this agreement stabilized the Franco-Turkish front and served as an important precursor to the broader territorial settlement later codified in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.⁹²

For the Armenian population, this geopolitical reconfiguration had devastating consequences. The French withdrawal from Cilicia triggered a second major wave of forced displacement, as Armenians who had repatriated under French protection were once again compelled to flee. In a letter dated 4 February 1922, Catholicos Sahak II informed Archbishop Torgom Gushakian that Armenian arrivals had reached 45,000 in Syria and 6,000 in Lebanon.⁹³ By 1922-1923, the Armenian population in Syria, distributed across

90 The Syrian Congress (1919) became a central political body aimed at articulating Syria's demand for independence and presenting it on the international stage. It brought together various political forces, while also exposing deep divisions, particularly over the issue of the French mandate. The Congress supported independence and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, reaffirming its position to the King-Crane Commission. However, internal disagreements and external pressures limited its effectiveness. Allawi, *Faisal*, 259-265.

91 French forces entered Damascus on 25 July 1920. In the aftermath, Faisal appointed Ala al-Din al-Darubi to head a new Syrian government, which subsequently accepted French demands concerning Faisal's deposition, the disbandment of the Syrian army, and the implementation of other mandatory conditions. Faisal departed Damascus on 28 July and left Syria permanently on 1 August 1920.

92 Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 129.

93 Yeghiayan, *Contemporary History*, 246.

Aleppo, Northern Syria, Alexandretta, Damascus, Beylan, Hama-Homs, and Kessab, had reached 111,250, of whom approximately 65,000 were concentrated in Aleppo alone.⁹⁴

The consolidation of the French Mandate created a new, albeit imposed, framework for the socio-economic integration of Armenians, who by that stage lacked any viable political alternative. This transition marked a decisive shift in the Armenian experience in Syria, transforming a condition of prolonged displacement into one of more permanent communal and economic settlement.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Faisal's Policies Toward Armenian Deportees

Although Emir Faisal ultimately suffered political defeat, his administration played an important role in shaping the post-genocide experience of Armenian survivors in Syria. His policies toward Armenian refugees reflected both humanitarian concern and broader state-building ambitions, yet any assessment of Armenian-Arab relations during this period must avoid overly idealized interpretations. Faisal's authority operated within a fragile and highly fragmented political environment, constrained by competing British and French interests, internal divisions, and localized structures of power.

While urban political elites in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama increasingly cooperated in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, effective political authority remained largely confined to these major centers. Beyond them, particularly in the desert regions of Deir ez-Zor, Rakka, and Ras ul-Ayn, where large numbers of Armenian deportees had been concentrated since 1915, power remained in the hands of tribal leaders rather than the Damascus administration. Despite the directives of Sharif Hussein bin Ali encouraging support for Armenian refugees, Faisal's practical ability to shape events across these territories remained limited, reflecting the broader decentralized nature of political authority in the late Ottoman Middle East.⁹⁵

Armenian-Arab relations during this period were marked by elements of mutual distrust rooted in broader historical and political realities. In the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, Armenians often remained cautious within predominantly Muslim environments, while segments of the Syrian Arab population viewed them with suspicion, fearing they might become instruments of French influence. Nevertheless, these tensions remained largely localized and did not fundamentally overshadow the broader pattern of cooperation between Armenian deportees, Arab society, and segments of the Arab political leadership.

During Faisal's administration, Armenian deportees gradually began integrating into Syria's socio-economic fabric under extremely precarious conditions shaped by war,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 248.

⁹⁵ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 36.

famine, disease, and political instability. At the same time, Syria's fragmented and diverse social structure significantly influenced this process of adaptation. Despite these hardships, Armenians remained deeply committed to preserving their national and cultural identity, viewing communal cohesion as essential both for survival and integration.

This process was facilitated by targeted administrative and economic measures under Faisal's administration, including debt deferments and financial assistance programs, which helped alleviate immediate hardship and fostered a degree of institutional trust between the Armenian community and the emerging Syrian authorities.

Nevertheless, Armenian deportees continued to face significant obstacles to long-term economic advancement. The fragile postwar Syrian economy offered limited opportunities for large-scale commercial or industrial development, leaving most Armenians confined to subsistence-level livelihoods as laborers, artisans, or small-scale merchants. This economic marginalization reflected both the structural weakness of the host economy and the difficulties of rebuilding life after genocide and forced displacement.

Relations with segments of the local Syrian Arab population were likewise marked by occasional social tension, often driven by perceptions of economic competition over scarce resources and employment. Contemporary accounts, however, suggest that these frictions gradually diminished as the economic contributions of Armenians became more visible. As At-Taquadum observed, Armenian deportees played a notable role in sustaining regional agricultural production and economic recovery.⁹⁶

Although resistance among segments of the local population gradually weakened as the economic contributions of Armenians became more apparent, questions surrounding their long-term settlement and social position remained sensitive within the evolving Syrian socio-political landscape. Arab historiography has often emphasized the comparatively rapid integration of Armenian deportees, attributing it to their communal cohesion, adaptability, and strong commitment to preserving cultural identity. Even under conditions of extreme hardship, Armenian survivors established schools, churches, charitable organizations, and other communal institutions to safeguard collective continuity.⁹⁷

Moussa Prince, the Lebanese-Arab jurist and historian who used the term "Armenocide," identified adaptability and viability as the defining qualities that enabled Armenians to overcome the trauma of genocide and sustain historical continuity.⁹⁸ Similarly, Nicola Migliorino has highlighted the survivors' determination to reconstruct a "symbolic Armenian homeland" within Syria through institutional rebuilding, communal solidarity, and a conscious resistance to assimilation.⁹⁹ A similar perspective was articulated by the Syrian historian Osman al-Turk, who emphasized the resilience and

⁹⁶ *The documentary material*, 185.

⁹⁷ Samir Arbash, *Armīniya: Arḍ wa Sha'b* [Armenia: Country and Nation] (Beirut: Dar ar-Rihani, 1991), 213.

⁹⁸ Moussa Prince, *Այսպիսի հեռանկար. Հայկական լինելիությունը* [Future Prospect: Armenian Existence], *Azduk* (Beirut), August 19, 1967.

⁹⁹ Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethnocultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis*, *Studies in Forced Migration*, Vol. 21 (Oxford, 2008), 46.

socio-economic contributions of Armenian deportees, noting that despite arriving with virtually no material resources, they gradually established livelihoods through hard work and became active contributors to Syria's economic and industrial development.¹⁰⁰

The legal status of Armenian deportees was a fundamental issue in their integration into Syrian society. Having been stripped of Ottoman citizenship without acquiring a new nationality, many existed in a condition of statelessness that severely restricted access to employment, education, property ownership, and freedom of movement. In Syria, some of these obstacles were gradually mitigated through administrative and legal measures that defined the rights and obligations of Armenian deportees within the emerging state framework.

At the same time, tensions with segments of the local Arab population persisted, driven by economic hardship, competition over scarce resources, and social anxieties toward a large refugee population differing in religion, language, and customs. These tensions were further shaped by the broader wartime context, including famine, disease, and hostile narratives promoted by local actors aligned with the Young Turk regime.¹⁰¹

Following the establishment of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, a more formal legal framework for minority protection emerged. While preserving the principle of local self-government, the mandate guaranteed legal equality, freedom of conscience, and communal educational rights, thereby creating a more structured basis for the long-term integration of Armenian refugees.¹⁰²

Moving beyond relative communal isolation, Armenians became increasingly engaged in Syria's economic, cultural, and political life. By the early 1920s, this participation extended beyond internal communal affairs, including collaboration with Arab political actors in emerging political movements such as the Communist Party of Syria. Despite a highly polarized political environment, the Armenian community gradually succeeded in institutionalizing its presence within Syria's public sphere.

The stabilization of the Armenian presence in postwar Syria was shaped in no small measure by the policies initiated during Faisal's administration. Moving beyond emergency humanitarian relief, these measures institutionalized protection, inclusion, and administrative support, facilitating the transition of Armenian survivors from temporary displacement toward more permanent settlement. By providing a degree of security and political legitimacy at a moment of profound instability, Faisal's administration created conditions that enabled Armenians to rebuild communal life and gradually integrate into Syrian society. In the decades that followed, the Syrian Armenian community emerged as one of the most active and institutionally developed centers of the Armenian diaspora in the Arab Middle East.

100 Osman At-Turk, *Pages of Armenian History* (Aleppo: Al-Ahram, 1960), 284.

101 Muhammad Kurd Ali, *Khuṭaṭ Al-Shām* [Sham plans, vol. 3] (Damascus: Al-Nuriya, 1983), 247.

102 On the citizenship and other rights of Armenian refugees in Syria, see Victoria Abrahamyan, "Citizen Strangers: Identity Labelling and Discourse in the French Mandatory Syria, 1920-1932," *Journal of Migration History* 6 (2020): 40-61.

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ERNST JAKOB CHRISTOFFEL IN MALATIA: “THE FATHER OF THE BLIND” AS A WITNESS OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE (APRIL 1916 – FEBRUARY 1919)

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Abstract

In January 1909, Ernst Jakob Christoffel and his sister Hedwig settled in Malatia, where he founded a care facility named *Bethesda* for blind individuals and those with visual impairments. By the eve of WWI, *Bethesda* housed more than 80 residents, the majority of them Armenians. Christoffel’s two-year absence beginning in the spring of 1914 proved catastrophic, as during the Armenian Genocide nearly three-quarters of his Armenian wards were either deported or killed. His return in April 1916 marked a crucial turning point – he not only saved the last group of his wards from deportation but also transformed his institution into one of the rare sites of refuge amid the continuing violence.

This article examines Christoffel’s activities in Malatia between April 1916 and February 1919, situating him as a significant yet understudied German witness to the final stages of the Armenian Genocide. It investigates how Christoffel managed to protect his remaining Armenian wards after such a prolonged absence, the dynamics of his interactions with local Ottoman authorities, the strategies he employed to navigate constant threats to both his wards and himself, and the extent to which German diplomatic or missionary networks supported his efforts. Finally, it considers how Christoffel’s testimonies enrich our understanding of German humanitarian involvement and witnessing during the genocide.

Keywords: German missions in the Ottoman Empire; Christian Mission of the Blind in the Orient; Malatia; Bethesda; eyewitness of the Armenian Genocide

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Introduction

The activities of German missions among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire began during the Hamidian massacres, as a response to the atrocities. In February 1896, Ernst Lohmann, the pastor of *Christuskirche* in Frankfurt am Main, published in his newspaper a public appeal – the first call to help Armenian survivors and to collect donations on their behalf in Germany.¹ A similar initiative followed on March 24, 1896, launched by *Kaiserswerther Diakonissenhaus* [Kaiserswerth Deaconess House].² The Kaiserswerth Deaconess House expressed readiness, contingent on sufficient donations, to take under its care the survived Armenian orphan girls at its station in Smyrna, where, on June 29, 1896, the first Armenian orphans found refuge.³ Later, this mission also provided shelter for Armenian orphan girls at its stations in Beirut and Jerusalem.

On July 2, 1896, Ernst Lohmann, Johannes Lepsius, and others founded the *Deutscher Hilfsbund für Armenien* [German Aid Society for Armenia] in Frankfurt am Main, which in the following months took the responsibility to care for the Armenian children in Kharberd (relocated to Mezire in 1897), Van, and Marash, as well as in Constantinople, with the goal of providing care to 400 Armenian children at the initial stage.⁴ More than a decade later, main stations were also established in Mush and Haruniye.

Although at the initial stage, Lohmann and Lepsius worked jointly – in fact serving as the driving force for the newly founded mission in Frankfurt and Berlin – after disagreements, that arose during a Berlin gathering in the autumn of 1896, they eventually parted ways. The German Aid Society for Armenia was renamed the *Deutscher Hilfsbund für christliches Liebeswerk im Orient* [German Aid Society for Christian Charity Work in the Orient] and continued to be led by Ernst Lohmann, while Lepsius continued his work within the framework of the *Deutsche Orient-Mission*, which he had founded earlier, in the autumn of 1895,⁵ establishing stations in Diarbekir, Urfa, as well as in Bulgaria and Persia.

During the last months of 1896, two more German missions – *Syrisches Waisenhaus* [Syrian Orphanage] and the *Jerusalemsverein* [Jerusalem Union] – also launched a call for aid to Armenians. These missions sheltered Armenian children orphaned during the Hamidian massacres at their stations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Jerusalem Union immediately began constructing an impressive building in Bethlehem, known as the “Armenian Orphanage,” which was completed in the autumn of 1898. Its opening was also attended by German Emperor Wilhelm II and his wife. Nevertheless, due to Turkish

1 “Der Notschrei Armeniens,” *Licht und Leben*, no. 15 (April 11, 1896): 139-140.

2 Evangelisches Zentralarchiv (EZA), 2001/3826, “Herzliche Bitte für die armenischen Waisen,” *Kaiserswerther*, March 24, 1896, 1-2.

3 “Von unserer Arbeit an den armenischen Waisen und Notleidenden,” *Mitteilungen Nr. 141 aus dem Kaiserswerther Diakonissenhause*, no. 141 (1897): 12.

4 Deutscher Hilfsbund für christliches Liebeswerk im Orient e.V., ed. *Skizzen und Bilder aus dem Orient* (Dinglingen: St. Johannis-Druckerei, 1899), 54.

5 Johannes Lepsius, “30 Jahre Deutsche Orient-Mission,” *Der Orient*, no. 1 (1925): 11.

obstacles, only 20 Armenian children were able to find refuge there.⁶ The number of Armenian children being cared of in the Syrian Orphanage was significantly higher.

The humanitarian movement formed in Germany in 1896-1897 to aid Armenians who had survived the Hamidian massacres gradually weakened in the following years. The majority of the missions faced a shortage of donations to support Armenians. Both the reduction in funding and Turkish pressures, along with the natural decrease in the number of orphans, as they reached adulthood and left the orphanages, contributed to the declining number of Armenians under the care of German missions. The only exception was the German Aid Society for Christian Charity Work in the Orient, whose number of orphans multiplied, reaching nearly 2,000 on the eve of WWI.⁷ During the two decades, the aforementioned German missions founded orphanages, schools, seminaries, workshops, hospitals, and shelters for widows, and they also undertook efforts to promote Evangelical Christianity.

The final German initiative for Armenians belonged to Ernst Jakob Christoffel, which later acquired an institutional form under the name *Christliche Blindenmission im Orient* [Christian Mission of the Blind in the Orient].

Christoffel's Activities in the Ottoman Empire by 1914

Ernst Jakob Christoffel (1876-1955) first traveled to the Ottoman Empire in 1905 at the request of Professor Georges Godet, president of the *Schweizer Hilfskomitees für Armenien* [Swiss Relief Committee for Armenia],⁸ to lead the Swiss-American missionary station in Sebastia beginning in September of that year and to participate in teaching orphans. During this time, he witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by blind individuals and those with visual impairments in the Ottoman Empire, laying the foundation for his future work dedicated to their care.

In the spring of 1907, Ernst Jakob Christoffel and his sister Hedwig returned to Germany.⁹ After some organizational work in Germany, they returned to the Ottoman Empire at the end of 1908 to focus on helping the blind. As there was no established mission or institution, they worked as independent missionaries (*Freimissionare*), relying primarily on support from relatives in their hometown and a network of benefactors he had cultivated during his study and working years in Switzerland.

Their efforts, which began in 1909, initially focused on caring for the poor in Malatia. They reached out to those in need, making numerous unplanned purchases to alleviate poverty – a generosity that soon exhausted their available funds.

6 "Bethlehem," *Neueste Nachrichten aus dem Morgenlande*, no. 6 (December 1899): 227-229.

7 Friedrich Schuchardt, "Geschäftsbericht," *Sonnen-Aufgang*, no. 7 (April 1913): 99.

8 Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Die Schweiz des Fin de Siècle und 'Armenien,'" in *Die Armenische Frage und die Schweiz 1896-1923*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zürich: Chronos, 1999), 137.

9 Sabine Thüne, *Ernst Jakob Christoffel. Ein Leben im Dienst Jesu* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2007), 27.

However, their work in Malatia began under difficult circumstances. First, Hedwig Christoffel fell seriously ill with typhoid and was bedridden for 71 days.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, Christoffel also contracted typhoid. During this challenging period, they received significant support from missionary Jensine Oerts, head of the Malatia substation of the German Aid Society for Christian Charity Work in the Orient (*Deutscher Hilfsbund für christliches Liebeswerk im Orient*).¹¹

According to Christoffel, the massacres of Cilician Armenians in April 1909 were likely to continue in Malatia as well.¹² He claimed that local Turks and some neighboring Kurdish tribes had already prepared and were ready to act. Furthermore, he reported that a list of influential individuals targeted for elimination had been prepared; his own name appeared third on the list, following that of Mustafa Agha Afizoglu,¹³ the mayor of Malatia. Hedwig Christoffel's name was fourth.¹⁴ Although Christoffel does not specify who headed the list, it can be inferred that it was likely a local Armenian religious leader, a prominent community figure, or possibly another missionary.

In 1913, the station was bolstered by the arrival of Hans Bauernfeind, who married Hedwig Christoffel on October 12 of that year.¹⁵ That same year, Betty Warth, a blind teacher for the visually impaired, joined the station. With support from Swiss benefactors, Christoffel purchased a new building in 1913, where he relocated those under his care – the blind, individuals with visual and intellectual disabilities, as well as some begging children.

The Malatia Station in 1915 and the Return and Activities of Christoffel, 1916-1919

In May 1914, Christoffel returned to Europe to raise funds for establishing a new station in Diarbekir and to expand educational activities in Malatia. However, the outbreak of WWI forced him to remain in Germany longer than planned. During this time, he took on the role of military preacher, a position he held until the end of 1915. He could not return to Malatia until April 1916.

¹⁰ Ibid., 70.

¹¹ Hermann Lörner, ed., *Vom Werden einer Mission* (Wuppertal-Barmen: Aussaat-Verlag, 1948), 6.

¹² Ernst Jakob Christoffel, *Zwischen Saat und Ernte* (Diesdorf [Breslau]: Selbstverlag, 1933), 66.

¹³ Because of his consistent humanitarian attitude toward the “giaours” (i.e., Armenians), Mustafa Agha Afizoglu incurred the hostility of the local Turkish population and was ultimately killed by his own sons. In recognition of the support, he provided to Armenians during the Hamidian massacres, the mayor was awarded the French Légion d'Honneur. During World War I, Mustafa Agha Afizoglu also received the Roter Adlerorden, 4th Class (Red Eagle Order, 4th Class), in recognition of his humanitarian assistance and loyalty to the German Empire. See Ernst Jakob Christoffel, *Aus dunklen Tiefen: Erlebnisse eines deutschen Missionars in türkisch Kurdistan während der Kriegsjahre 1916-1918* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1921), 28.

¹⁴ Christoffel, *Zwischen*, 66-68.

¹⁵ “Hochzeitsfeier und Aussendung in die Blindenarbeit in Malatia,” *Christlicher Volksbote aus Basel*, no. 45 (November 5, 1913): 358.

Meanwhile, in Malatia, arrests began on 16 April 1915, when approximately 80 prominent individuals, including the Deputy of the Diocese, Pastor Mushegh Ter-Musheghian, as well as other Armenian Apostolic, Evangelical, and Catholic priests, were detained.¹⁶ During Christoffel's absence, Hans Bauernfeind, who assumed management of the station together with his wife, oversaw a significant decline. Owing to poor management, approximately 60 of the station's 84 Armenians were lost. Of the roughly 60 Armenians deported from the station, only three were able to return, while another three survived in other locations, despite the fact that many were blind or otherwise physically impaired.¹⁷ The station's employees, Karapet and Grigor, were also killed. While Karapet's family found refuge at the station, almost all of Grigor's family perished.¹⁸

Bauernfeind attempted to transfer the remaining children to other facilities run by the German Orient Mission and the German Aid Society for Christian Charity Work in the Orient, but he was unsuccessful. Ultimately, on August 11, 1915, the Bauernfeind couple left Malatia to return to Germany,¹⁹ leaving the station under the leadership of two Armenian employees, Makrouhi (an employee of the station) and Khoren (the teacher for the blind). By the time they departed, the station was brought to the brink of complete destruction. According to contemporary accounts, Hans Bauernfeind is among the few German missionaries in the Ottoman Empire whose actions had a markedly negative impact. However, his "Diary [Tagebuch],"²⁰ remains an extremely important primary source regarding the deportations, arrests, killings, rapes, and the atmosphere in the city prior to their departure.

Given these circumstances, at the end of 1915, Ernst Jakob Christoffel applied to the Ministry of Military Affairs for exemption from military service and permission to return to the Ottoman Empire. In Constantinople, he received support from both the German Embassy and the military preacher Siegfried von Lüttichau. Additionally, Enver Pasha secured a letter of guarantee from the War Ministry, allowing him to travel to Malatia.²¹

16 Arshak Alpoyachian, *Պատմություն Մալաթիայի հայրց* [History of the Armenians of Malatia] (Beirut: Sevan Press, 1961), 944.

17 The activities of Hans Bauernfeind will not be presented in this article. For more details about him, see Hayk Martirosyan, *Humanismus und christliche Barmherzigkeit: Geschichte der deutschen Missionen für die Armenier im Osmanischen Reich 1896-1919* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2024), 247-249. See also Tessa Hofmann and Meline Pehlivanian, "Der schlimmsten Orte einer ... Malatia 1915 bis 1918," *AGA Online*, <https://www.aga-online.org/literatur-und-links/texte/malatia/>, accessed 01.05.2025. Apparently, the 700 Armenian children from the Turkish orphanage established in Kharberd for the purpose of Turkification were also killed near Malatia. After some time, they were deported and drowned in the Euphrates River not far from the city. See Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2011), 306.

18 Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 16-17.

19 For the last time, Bauernfeind participated in a discussion on Armenian issues at the Orient Conference held in Berlin on 8 October 1915, during which Johannes Lepsius leveled serious accusations against him. Thereafter, Bauernfeind appears to have had no further involvement in Armenian affairs. See EZA (Evangelisches Zentralarchiv), 623/16, Christliche Blindenmission im Orient, Protokoll der Besprechung, 23 September 1916, 2.

20 Hans Bauernfeind, *Tagebuch* (machine-written manuscript, Malatia, 1915).

21 Fritz Schmidt-König, *Ernst J. Christoffel – Vater der Blinden im Orient* (Gießen and Basel: Brunnen-Verlag,

Christoffel's close relationship with military preacher von Lüttichau, who held him in high regard, would later prove crucial. Von Lüttichau described Christoffel in his diary on 24 February 1916: "A truly wonderful person! A Christian, one rarely finds. So clear and transparent, and for that reason, so absolutely natural in his human nature and in his Christian character! We understand each other well and have brotherly respect towards each other."²² It seems that in Christoffel, von Lüttichau found the ideal missionary he had envisioned, embodying the qualities of a true missionary.

On 8 April 1916, after nearly two years of absence, Christoffel returned to Malatia to find the station in a state of crisis. Only the mayor, Mustafa Agha Afizoglu, had made any attempt to support it. Most residents had either been exiled or killed, leaving behind only 30 Armenians, including recent arrivals who had found refuge in "Bethesda."²³ At the time of Christoffel's arrival, orders had already been issued to deport the remaining wards and women, and the station building had been converted into a typhus hospital. Upon his return, Christoffel's first action was to halt the deportation of the children, although they had already been removed from the station. He succeeded in bringing them back, but they were forced to sleep outside for weeks, as the station was still functioning as a field hospital for approximately 150 typhus-infected soldiers.²⁴

Having successfully stopped the deportation of his children and recovered his wards, Christoffel transformed the Malatia station into an oasis of hope. Many individuals fleeing from harems or enslavement by local families found refuge in "Bethesda." However, this humanitarian work deepened tensions between Christoffel and the local Mutasarrif. The latter attempted to have Christoffel arrested by sending an accusatory letter to Constantinople, portraying him as a figure hindering reconciliation between Muslim and Christian communities. He alleged that during a liturgy led by Christoffel—despite the official ban on Christian ecclesiastical ceremonies—Armenians from various backgrounds, including forcibly Islamized individuals, were in attendance. The mutasarrif framed this as an attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity. He also ordered round-the-clock surveillance of the station.²⁵ The intervention of embassy preacher Count von Lüttichau and the German Embassy proved crucial in defusing the serious accusations against Christoffel, ultimately securing the station's continued operation.

As previously noted, Christoffel was highly esteemed by both von Lüttichau and the German Embassy, which offered him substantial support. In 1916, the groundwork was laid for more formal assistance: the embassy advised Christoffel's supporters in Germany to institutionalize their operations in order to gain "necessary diplomatic support"

1976), 19.

22 Siegfried von Lüttichau, *Tagebuchblätter aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (als Manuskript vervielfältigt), 3rd part, vol. 1 (Kirchheim/Teck 1993), 111.

23 Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 28.

24 Ibid., 23-25.

25 Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 43-46.

from the state.²⁶ As a result, on 3 July 1916, the Christliche Blindenmission im Orient e.V. (Christian Mission of the Blind in the Orient)²⁷ was founded. On 25 September 1916, the mission's leadership sent a formal letter to von Lüttichau, informing him of the institutionalization of their efforts and requesting additional embassy support for the Malatia station.²⁸ Although Christoffel had initially preferred to operate as a free missionary—largely avoiding state support in order to preserve his autonomy—the challenges posed by the Mutasarrıf and the existential threat to the station made it clear that the mission could no longer function without diplomatic backing.

Support for Christoffel became even more “visible” to local authorities after Count von Lüttichau's visit to Malatia on 4 July 1916, as part of a two-month tour of the Ottoman Empire's eastern provinces. He remained in Malatia for several weeks, during which Christoffel assisted him and helped him recover from the exhaustion of his journey.

Moreover, after von Lüttichau's intervention, Christoffel began receiving 30 kilograms of grain daily, with payment made in banknotes.²⁹ The problem was that the prices of essential goods had drastically increased in the Ottoman Empire due to the war, while the currency had lost its value. Meanwhile, the number of “Bethesda” wards grew, reaching 170 within four months of Christoffel's arrival, as Armenians fled from harems and Muslim families, seeking refuge in “Bethesda.” Support was also provided to Armenians who remained in the city or returned when possible.³⁰ By the summer of 1916, this increase in expenses was partially mitigated by an unexpected 6,000-mark donation raised by the station's supporters in Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark, which was sent to Malatia through the Dresdener Bank and Deutsche Orient-Bank.³¹

In the fall of 1916, the governor of Malatia was replaced, and Christoffel's relations with the newly official gradually improved. Additionally, Christoffel was able to reclaim some of the station's buildings from the military. The number of Armenians sheltered at the station continued to rise, as many Armenian women and children, previously held by Turkish and Kurdish families, fled to “Bethesda.” Occasionally, their “owners” would come to reclaim them, but Christoffel managed to prevent this.³² Widows with children who could sustain themselves through work at the station also found refuge there. Under these circumstances, the number of people sheltered at the station soon reached 240.³³ Some children, unable to be housed at the station due to local conditions, were placed with Armenian families who had survived in Malatia and had not been deported, with

²⁶ Lörner, *Vom Werden*, 8.

²⁷ EZA 623/16, *Protokoll der Vorstandssitzung des Vereins “Christliche Blindenmission im Orient*, 3 July 1916, 1-2.

²⁸ EZA 623/16, *Brief an Herrn Marinefeldprediger Graf von Lüttichau*, 25 September 1916, 1-2.

²⁹ “Kleinasien,” *Christlicher Volksbote aus Basel*, no. 12 (20 March 1918), 95.

³⁰ EZA 623/16, *Deutsche Blindenmission im Orient: Berichte des Hausvaters Christoffel und der blinden Blindenlehrerin Betty Warth aus dem Blindenheim Malatia vom Sommer 1916*, 1-3.

³¹ EZA 623/16, *Christliche Blindenmission im Orient, Protokoll der Besprechung*, 23 September 1916, 2-3.

³² In “Bethesda,” there were 80 such women. Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 28-30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

Christoffel paying for their care and ensuring their safety. The number of Armenians finding shelter in “Bethesda” and receiving support from the station continued to grow in the following months and years.

In the summer of 1917, Hildegard Schuler, the daughter of Christoffel’s eldest sister, arrived in Malatia to assist him. Before traveling to the Ottoman Empire, she had trained in childcare, participated in courses for teaching blind individuals, and learned Ottoman Turkish. Although Hildegard’s arrival was significant support to Christoffel, she passed away in November 1918 at the age of 22, having spent less than a year and a half at the station.³⁴

After WWI ended, under pressure from the victorious Allied powers, England and France, all Germans—including missionaries—were forced to leave the Ottoman Empire. To ensure the continued survival of the station’s residents, Christoffel distributed the wards of “Bethesda” to trustworthy families, compensating them for their care. Only 35 children remained at the station, and Christoffel procured enough grain for the next five months to sustain operations. The management of the station was then entrusted to Khoren, the teacher for the blind, and Makrouhi, the widow of the deceased cook.³⁵ Subsequently, the station was placed under the supervision of employees of the American Board. Later, the American missionaries transferred all of their orphans from Malatia, as well as from Kharberd and Mezereh, to Syria.³⁶

On 9 February 1919, Christoffel, accompanied by several companions and his three adopted children—nine-year-old Heinz, seven-year-old Otto (both Armenians),³⁷ and six-year-old Kurdish Liesel—left Malatia intending to return to Germany. In Constantinople, Heinz and Otto were taken from him, and they were able to reunite with Christoffel only years later.³⁸

On 27 June 1919, Christoffel arrived in Germany after enduring considerable hardships.³⁹ This marked the end of Ernst Jakob Christoffel’s work and the mission for the blind in the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁰ The real estate he had acquired over the years in Malatia was lost to him. However, the fruits of his final years of effort remained: “[...] Over the course of three years, until my expulsion, about a thousand Armenians, women, young girls, young men, and children, passed through our house. For all of them, it meant rescue

³⁴ Lörner, *Vom Werden*, 8.

³⁵ Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 91.

³⁶ Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide. Turkey’s Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894-1924* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 2019), 368.

³⁷ Heinz Dökmeyan was the brother of Grigor, a staff member at the station. He survived the genocide by serving as a shepherd in a Kurdish family. Otto (1912-2006) came from a well-known family in Malatia and was taken in by the station at the age of four in 1916. See Christoffel, *Aus dunklen Zeiten*, 57-59.

³⁸ For a more detailed account of how the two boys were taken from Christoffel and their eventual reunion with him, see Martirosyan, *Humanismus und christliche Barmherzigkeit*, 255-256.

³⁹ Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 76-78. See also Schmidt-König, *Ernst J. Christoffel*, 20-22.

⁴⁰ In 1924, during the early years of the Republic of Turkey, Christoffel made another attempt to re-establish himself in the country. However, upon arriving in Constantinople, he was denied permission to travel to Malatia.

from death or something even worse.”⁴¹ This is how Christoffel summarizes his work in his memoirs.

Ernst Jakob Christoffel as a Witness of the Armenian Genocide

Ernst Jakob Christoffel’s testimonies are among the most important sources documenting the later period of the Armenian Genocide (from April 1916 onward) in Malatia. He documented these events as they unfolded, addressing them not only to the German embassy and government institutions but also to church organizations and supporters of the mission in Germany and Switzerland. Excerpts from these letters and reports were published in Swiss newspapers at the time. His letters and reports were not merely testimonies but also urgent appeals for help—efforts to save at least those who had survived and those involved in various jobs. In the spring of 1916, as Christoffel traveled from Constantinople to Malatia, stopping in Sebastia, Eregli, and Caesarea, he wrote to the German Consul Mordtmann on April 1:

[...] In Eregli, I met the last Armenians who had not converted to Islam. From there to here, everything has been radically cleaned up, either through deportation, forced conversion to Islam, or massacre. No Armenian voice is heard anywhere anymore. In Gemerek, thousands were killed. In the area around Yozgat, the populations of six Armenian villages were massacred; everyone, even the infants. On the road, I still encountered several thousand Armenian road workers (*ameli tabúri*), most of whom were also forced to convert to Islam; they were continually pressured to adopt Islam. There is a danger that once these people complete their work, they may also be killed for some reason, just as it is said to have happened in the Ersingan region. Can their lives not be secured? Can nothing be done for the remnants of the people?⁴²

At the end of the letter, Christoffel noted that rumors had spread among both Armenians and Turks that Germans were responsible for these horrors. These were essentially Christoffel’s first testimonies; he had not even arrived in Malatia yet, and what he described was based on what he had seen along the way. He did not hesitate to describe the situation and emphasize the full brutality of the massacres, noting that even infants were not spared. He warned that, most probably, if nothing were done, even the Armenians working on the roads for the Turks would be killed after fulfilling their duties.

⁴¹ Christoffel, *Zwischen*, 121.

⁴² Ernst Jakob Christoffel, *Brief an den Generalkonsul in Konstantinopel Mordtmann*, Siwas, April 1, 1916, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA), Bestand: Botschaft Konstantinopel, Band 100.

Once in Malatia, Christoffel continued documenting the murders, enslavement, and sexual violence perpetrated against Armenians. He addressed particularly painful subjects that were difficult even to record, including various forms of forced child prostitution involving both girls and boys, as well as the forced prostitution of Armenian women. Christoffel also identified individuals who played prominent roles in these crimes, one of the most notorious being “Hamid of Malatia,” a reference to Abdul Hamid II. This individual expanded a weaving and carpentry workshop into a large enterprise using wealth stolen from Armenians and secured certain privileges by supplying the military. Although he had ostensibly “rescued” hundreds of Armenians from exile, they effectively became his slaves, paying an extraordinarily high price for this so-called salvation. As Christoffel wrote, “[...] The women and girls were completely devoted to him, body and soul,”⁴³ describing the brutal conditions under which they continued to live. At times, as many as 700 to 800 people worked for him, the majority of them women and girls.

Christoffel also addressed other sensitive topics in his letters and, especially, in his memoirs. One such issue concerned whether German troops could have intervened to prevent the massacre of the Armenians. He framed the question more directly: “Is Germany—or are individual Germans—actively or passively guilty of the deportation of the Armenian people?” His answer, however, was negative,⁴⁴ apparently because he was not aware of such individuals, although they did in fact exist. Another direct question he posed was addressed to the German Evangelical Church, to which he belonged. He could not understand the behavior, restraint, and inactivity of the Evangelical Church:

[...] There is no doubt that what has been done and is still being done to the Armenian people is the greatest crime in world history. Will the people of the Reformation accept the complete destruction of a Christian nation by a degenerated, inferior race as an accepted fact? Will the German Evangelical Church, which is celebrating its Reformation centenary this year, have no word of protest that a sister church is being destroyed by sadistic fanatics? That would not be German, not Christian.⁴⁵

Such harsh criticism, and especially such vocabulary in this letter written on March 26, 1917, was indeed a rare occurrence in German society at that time.

Another target of Christoffel’s criticism was the European press, particularly German periodicals, including the *Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* published in Leipzig. He remarked: “It almost seems tragicomic when one reads in European

⁴³ Christoffel, *Aus dunklen*, 55.

⁴⁴ Christoffel, *Zwischen*, 113-115.

⁴⁵ Archiv der Christoffel-Blindenmission (Bensheim), Br/1917/1b, “Bericht des Herrn Ernst J. Christoffel, Vorsteher des Blindenheims Malatia über die Lage der Armenier, an Pastor G. Stoevesandt, Berlin,” Malatia, 26 March 1917, 2.

newspapers that the Armenians are the cause of the bloodbath. It is incomprehensible that even a paper like the Leipzig Lutheran Church Newspaper holds this view. Europe is falling for the old, repeated lie that also played such a role in previous massacres. One must not be too surprised; it does not fit into the program of high diplomacy.”⁴⁶

Similar concerns had previously been expressed by the leaders of two other German missionary organizations—the German Aid Society for Christian Charity Work in the Orient (Deutsches Hilfsbund für christliches Liebeswerk im Orient) and the German Orient Mission (Deutsche Orient-Mission), namely Ernst Lohmann and Johannes Lepsius—who criticized the distortion and politicization of reporting in certain sectors of the European press, particularly the German press, in accounts transmitted from Constantinople.

In his reports, Christoffel also addressed the possible scale of Armenian deaths during the Armenian Genocide. In a letter written in the spring of 1917 to August Wilhelm Schreiber—a board member of the Christian Mission of the Blind in the Orient (Deutsche Blindenmission im Orient) and director of the German Evangelical Missionary Aid (Deutsche Evangelische Missionshilfe)—Christoffel discussed the human losses suffered by the Armenians up to that point. Schreiber subsequently forwarded the letter to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs without expressing his own views on its contents. Referring to the situation as of March 1917, Christoffel wrote: “The losses of the Armenian people since the beginning of the exile in the summer of 1915 to today exceed 1 million. Some were killed in prisons after terrible torture. Most of the women and children died during the deportation as a result of hunger, epidemics, and murder.”⁴⁷

He then outlines the measures that should be taken immediately to improve the situation. These measures included: the return of forcibly Islamized Armenians to Christianity, the return of Armenian children kept in Muslim families, the return of confiscated religious and educational institutions, compensation for confiscated Armenian property, providing Armenians with the opportunity to leave the country, and allowing Christian religious ceremonies.⁴⁸ Although Christoffel mistakenly identified the summer of 1915 as the beginning of the deportations rather than March of the same year—likely reflecting the chronology in Malatia—it is clear from the measures he proposed that he possessed a strong understanding of the realities on the ground and articulated concrete proposals aimed at rescuing survivors and at least partially restoring their rights.

⁴⁶ Thüne, *Ernst Jakob Christoffel*, 41.

⁴⁷ Johannes Lepsius, ed., *Deutschland und Armenien 1914-1918: Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Potsdam: Tempelverlag, 1919), 353.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 354-355. A number of other Germans also testified to the forced Islamization of Armenians, including Consul Scheubner-Richter in Erzerum, Consul Kuckhoff in Samsun, Consul Dr. Bergfeld in Trapizon, German consular secretary Werth, and Consul Rössler in Aleppo, among others. See Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 292-305.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several key observations can be made regarding Ernst Jakob Christoffel's activities in Malatia. Upon his return, Christoffel succeeded in preventing the deportation of the last group of approximately thirty individuals under his care who had already received deportation orders. His presence provided crucial assistance to survivors in Malatia and its surrounding areas, offering a rare source of hope and refuge at a time of extreme vulnerability. He also managed to reclaim the Bethesda station, which had been seized by the Ottoman authorities and converted into a typhus field hospital, gradually restoring its buildings to their original humanitarian purpose. In doing so, the station became a small oasis of salvation, particularly for Armenian women and children who had escaped from Muslim households and harems where they had been held in conditions of servitude or captivity.

Despite repeated confrontations with local authorities, as well as with Turks and Kurds who considered themselves the “owners” of Armenian women and children and sought to reclaim them, Christoffel was able to assist or rescue approximately 1,000 Armenians, according to his own account. Beyond his direct humanitarian interventions, Christoffel's historical significance lies in his documentation. No other foreign observer appears to have recorded the later phases of the Armenian Genocide in Malatia—from April 1916 onward—with comparable depth and consistency. His reports, correspondence, and later memoirs therefore constitute some of the most significant and detailed contemporary testimonies on the Armenian Genocide in Malatia.

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GUARDIANS OF MEMORY: THE ROLE OF THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH IN POST-GENOCIDE ARMENIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

This article examines the Armenian Apostolic Church's role in preserving post-genocidal Armenian identity and memory within Armenia and the diaspora. It argues that the Church acts as a vital link connecting past traumas to present identity and future aspirations through rituals, narratives, and community institutions.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines theoretical analysis with survey data from Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. The theoretical framework draws from theories of collective identity, memory, and religion in post-conflict societies. The survey explores perceptions of the Church's role in preserving identity and genocide memory, noting differences between Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. In the diaspora, higher religiosity correlates with more frequent interaction with the Church, especially its communal activities. The Church is seen as a place to connect with Armenian identity, holding traditions and fostering a sense of Armenian Christian unity. This article also indicates that some believe a clear Armenian culture or identity might not exist today without the Church.

The article emphasises the Church's enduring significance as a pillar of Armenian resilience, particularly against assimilation in the diaspora, where communities are in constant fear of it. The findings contribute to understanding religion's role in post-traumatic identity and memory, suggesting future research areas like engaging younger generations and impacting genocide recognition advocacy.

Keywords: Armenian Apostolic Church; Armenian Genocide; collective memory; diaspora; identity; religion

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“Who Remembers the Armenians?”
 I remember them
 and I ride the nightmare bus with them
 each night
 and my coffee, this morning
 I’m drinking it with them.
 You, murderer –
 Who remembers you?¹

Introduction

During a research visit to Holy Etchmiadzin in September 2024, my attention was drawn to the central role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in shaping Armenian religious life and collective identity. Armenian Christianity, rooted in antiquity, has historically functioned as a core marker of ethnic continuity and communal cohesion. This religious framework has been profoundly shaped by the legacy of the Armenian Genocide, a collective traumatic experience that continues to structure social memory both within Armenia and throughout the global Armenian diaspora. The interrelationship between religion, genocide, identity formation, and collective memory—both in the Armenian homeland and in diasporic contexts—constitutes the central analytical focus of this research.

In April 2015, during the centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian Apostolic Church canonized Armenians killed by the Young Turk regime during the genocide, recognizing them as martyrs.² This decision underscored the enduring significance of collective trauma within the religious life of the Armenian Church and the broader Armenian community. The Armenian Genocide remains inseparable from post-genocidal Armenian ethnoreligious identity. Although specific numbers were not invoked during this act of mass canonization, nor could all victims necessarily be classified as martyrs within the theological framework of the Church, the event nevertheless symbolized a powerful intersection between religion, trauma, and collective remembrance.

Yet how is this relationship understood by ordinary Armenians? What meanings do they attribute to the genocide in their everyday lives? What role does the Church occupy in their perceptions of identity, memory, and belonging?

This article examines the role of genocide and religion in shaping post-genocide Armenian identity in the modern era. Its primary focus is on the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving and transmitting the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide, both within Armenia and across the global Armenian diaspora. Collective

¹ Najwan Darwish, *Nothing More to Lose* (NYRB/POETS, 2014), 104.

² Shushan Khachatryan, “A Resumption of Canonization after Centuries-Long Hiatus: The Armenian Genocide through the Lens of Neo-Martyrdom,” *Scrinium* 20 (2024):178, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1163/18177565-BJA10117>.

memory is a fluid and dynamic concept, continuously subject to reinterpretation and reconstruction across generations, particularly within geographically dispersed communities. At the same time, it serves as a crucial anchor of group identity, providing a shared sense of history, values, and collective destiny. Within this context, religion remains one of the principal elements uniting Armenians worldwide, which makes the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church especially significant in the preservation and transmission of collective memory.

The Armenian Genocide and its legacy have become cornerstones of modern Armenian identity, with religion constituting an integral component of this identity formation. The canonization of genocide victims represents just one example of the profound interconnection between religion, identity, and the memory of those targeted and killed on the basis of their ethno-religious belonging. Yet identity is not a fixed category; it is dynamic, negotiated, and subject to transformation over time. This raises a central question for the present research: who serves as the principal guardian of Armenian identity—the Church, the state, or other social and cultural institutions?

This study seeks to explore how Armenians in both Armenia and the diaspora perceive the Armenian Apostolic Church and its role in preserving collective memory and national identity. It asks whether significant differences or similarities exist between homeland and diasporic perspectives; how the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide has shaped Armenian religious identity; whether the Armenian Church remains the most essential institution in the preservation of Armenian identity; and to what extent it may be regarded as a true “guardian of memory.” The study also examines how diasporic Armenians preserve their sense of national belonging and resist assimilation in diverse social contexts. These questions are addressed through data collected from a survey conducted among Armenians in Armenia and across the diaspora.

Armenian identity is among just few ethnoreligious identities in the world. Armenians have a long history of persecution because of their religion and ethnicity. Researching how people perceive religion in modern times is particularly useful when the religion is so closely related to collective trauma. Comparing the views of Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora offers the prospect of generating insights on the role of religion in identity building. This research contributes to our efforts to understand the role of collective trauma, memory and religion in the process of identity building.

The primary research methods employed for this article were surveys and interviews conducted among Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. The central aim was to investigate the opinions and perceptions of the role and significance of the Armenian Apostolic Church. These surveys and interviews were carried out in Armenia, the USA, Australia, and various other countries across the world, providing a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives held by Armenians in both the homeland and the diaspora.

This article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between the Armenian Apostolic Church, the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide, and the ongoing construction of Armenian identity, examining how the Church functions as a repository of cultural heritage, a symbol of national resilience, and unity. A century after

the genocide, the Armenian identity continues to evolve, and the souls of killed martyrs continue to be an indivisible part of that identity.

Historical Context: The Armenian Genocide and the Church's Role

Armenians have inhabited the Armenian Highlands, a historical homeland covering more than 600,000 square kilometers, for millennia.³ There, they developed a distinct culture, identity, and statehood. In 301 AD, Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion.⁴ From that moment onward, Christianity became an integral component of Armenian ethnoreligious identity. Yet the same faith that helped shape and preserve Armenian identity also made Armenians a target of discrimination, persecution, and mass violence throughout history, culminating in the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

In its last decades, the Ottoman Empire struggled to reform and centralize its losing territories. This failed program resulted in mass violence against ethnic and religious minorities, especially in the end of the 19th century, when violence against Armenians became more frequent and systematic. In the quarter century preceding the 1915 genocide more than one hundred thousand Armenians were murdered.⁵

Ottoman authorities saw minorities as a threat to the Empire, which was getting weaker and weaker. World War I and war hysteria related to defeats motivated Ottoman authorities even more to proceed with a radical plan of centralization of the country and removal of its Christian population.⁶

In 1915, the Ottoman government implemented a systematic plan to eliminate its Armenian population. When undertaken, the plan became the Armenian Genocide. Among the decades-old plan of constructing a homogenous nation state by eradicating all non-Muslims, the start of systematic massacres of the Armenian population was also motivated by the participation of some Armenians in the Russian army and the Van uprising in April 1915.⁷

On April 24, 1915 a large number of Armenian intellectuals, among them also priests and other community leaders were arrested in Constantinople and later executed.⁸ The idea was to remove the Armenian leading and intellectual elite and to prevent any kind of resistance to a broader campaign of elimination. Over the course of the following months, a systematic campaign of extermination engulfed the Armenian population throughout the Ottoman Empire.

3 Robert H. Hewsen, "The Geography of Armenia," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1: The Dynastic Periods, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 5.

4 Meliné Karakashian, "Armenia: A Country's History of Challenges," *Journal of Social Issues* 54, no. 2 (1998): 385; Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia—A Very Brief History* (Yerevan: Zangak-97, 2021), 8.

5 Marc David Baer, *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars and Caliphs* (London: Basic Books, 2022), 13.

6 David Gaunt, "When Perpetual Persecution Becomes Ottoman Genocide," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 11, no. 1 (2020): 2.

7 Noah Berlatsky, *The Armenian Genocide* (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2015), 40.

8 Zoe Lowery and Jeri Freedman, *Genocide in Armenia* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2017), 22.

In the following months, around 1.5 million Armenian men, women and children were killed.⁹ Armenians were deported from their ancestral lands and forced to march to the Syrian Desert, where they were subjected to starvation, disease, and mass murder. Armenian children, especially orphans, were taken away with the intention of being assimilated and converted to Islam.¹⁰ This genocide erased Armenian presence from historic Armenian lands and changed the demographics of the region forever. Yet it also created a new Armenian identity of survivors, and a strong diaspora that tried to keep Armenian identity and culture alive far from the homeland.

The fact that some survived genocide because they converted to Islam¹¹ argues in favour of the religious interpretation of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Apostolic Church shared the same faith and destiny with its people. Destruction of both the ethnicity and religion of Armenians was a way towards cultural genocide.

The Armenian Apostolic Church in pre-genocide decades was divided into three major centres: the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Great House of Cilicia and the Holy See of Echmiadzin. The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople was not just a religious centre but also a de facto representative of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire in charge of many administrative and legal issues concerning Armenians.¹² The church was an institution of unity, language and cultural preservation. Because of its spiritual and identity role in the life of Armenian people, but also because of its leadership capabilities, the Armenian Apostolic Church was seen as a target of genocide. During the genocide, thousands of priests and higher-ranking clergy were killed.¹³ Many monasteries, churches, seminaries and schools were destroyed and looted.¹⁴ The organization and implementation of genocide showed a direct intention of Turkish authorities not just to destroy Armenians as a nation, but also their cultural heritage and religion, and completely erase any evidence of their centuries-long existence.¹⁵

9 Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 486.

10 Edita G. Gzoyan, Regina A. Galustyan, Shushan R. Khachatryan, and Narine V. Margaryan, "In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in State Orphanages during the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 243-263. See also Shushan Khachatryan, "Halidé Edip and the Turkification of Armenian Children: Enigmas, Problems and Questions," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 50.

11 Shushan Khachatryan, "Some Aspects of Theology and Religious Studies of Genocides: The Armenian Case," in *Dal Paleolitico al Genocidio Armeno: Ricerche su Causaso e Asia Centrale*, ed. Aldo Ferrari and Erica Ianiro (Ca' Foscari, 2015), 112.

12 Simon Payaslian, "The Destruction of the Armenian Church during the Genocide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 1, no. 2 (2006): 149-150.

13 Nerses Vrej Nersessian, "The Impact of the Genocide of 1915 on the Armenian Orthodox Apostolic Church," *Sion* 82, no. 10 (2015): 66-67.

14 Dickran Kouymjian, "When Does Genocide End? The Armenian Case" (Lecture, Sonoma State University, 2003), 8-10.

15 Peter Balakian, "Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction, and the Armenian Genocide," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 65.

After the genocide, the Church emerged as a source of spiritual and material assistance to the refugees and orphans. For the tens of thousands of survivors scattered around the region, different churches and monasteries served as shelters for them. For example, more than ten thousand survivors were saved and sheltered by the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem in Palestine.¹⁶

The mass dispersal of Armenian Genocide survivors across the globe led to the establishment of new dioceses and communities in numerous countries. This facilitated the critical preservation of Armenian identity, the unification of Armenians worldwide, advocacy for genocide recognition, and the enrichment of the cultural diversity in their new homelands. This also transformed Armenian identity, as it developed along divergent trajectories between post-Soviet Armenia and the diasporic communities, which faced the influence of assimilation. Nevertheless, the Armenian Apostolic Church has served as a unifying force and a core, indispensable element of Armenian identity across these diverse contexts. Today, the Armenian Genocide is officially denied by Turkey,¹⁷ so the Church also has a role in the fight against genocide denialism.

Despite facing the ongoing challenges of combating genocide denial and reclaiming its seized properties and cultural heritage in Turkey, the Church continues to play a central role in safeguarding the Armenian people's cultural and religious heritage.¹⁸

Theoretical Framework: Identity, Memory, and Religion

Everyone has a story, and everyone has an identity. Stories are an inseparable part of ourselves and our identities. People construct their identities through narratives that help them understand themselves and their place in the world. Identities can be both individual and collective, and collective memories play a key role in both.¹⁹ On the other hand, identities cannot exist without memory.²⁰

Memories can be positive or negative. Collective traumas are significant experiences that challenge a group's or society's existence or fundamental values and create lasting psychological consequences. These traumas significantly affect collective memories and identities and create an important foundation for post-traumatic nation-building.²¹ With this outcome, the new nation gains a narrative, "past abuses," on which it bases its new

16 Harry Hagopian, *The Armenian Church in the Holy Land* (n.p.: 2017), 15.

17 Ozlem Belcim Galip, "The Armenian Genocide and Armenian Identity in Modern Turkish Novels," *Turkish Studies* 20, no. 1 (2019): 92-119.

18 Aram I, "The Armenian Genocide: From Recognition to Reparations," *International Criminal Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 233-41.

19 Lea David, "Against Standardization of Memory," *Human Rights Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2017): 303.

20 Selma Leydesdorff, "How Shall We Remember Srebrenica? Will the Language of Law Structure Our Memory," in *Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society*, ed. Y. Gutman, A. D. Brown, and A. Sodaro (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 125.

21 Kirk A. Denton, *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021), 17.

national identity.²² Every nation needs a narrative for the construction of its nationhood,²³ but in the situations of collective traumas, those traumas could be selected as “chosen traumas” and become a central point of formation for new nationhood.²⁴ Genocide intends to destroy a certain group and its identity, which means also the group’s collective memory and its complete sense of attachment to its past and history.²⁵ After the genocide, the “shattered nation” needs to be rebuilt.²⁶ Collective trauma then becomes an integral part of a nation’s DNA and its identity onwards.

The “grand narrative”²⁷ of genocide, as formulated by Badema Pitic, becomes fundamental to the group’s identity and is used to make sense of the past and present and to guide the future. Also, with the support of the state, that narrative becomes part of institutions and is used in a systematic way.²⁸ This intersects with religion, which provides frameworks for understanding suffering, death, and injustice, but also serves as a source of resilience, resistance, and identity preservation. This is especially important when it comes to transmitting memories to younger generations. A unique feature of collective identity is its possibility to be transmitted to members of a group who did not witness or participate in events that formed that memory.²⁹ By sharing identity, we also share memory and the complete past of our community. Hirsch sees this as postmemory - “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”³⁰

Ethnoreligious societies are formed around a shared religious faith and a shared ethnicity. The fact that one group shares so much makes the identity and connection between groups even stronger. This is even more the case during and after collective traumas, when religion serves as a “force for reconciliation and healing.”³¹ Avigail Eisenberg argues that religion

22 Joseph P. Feldman, *Memories before the State: Postwar Peru and the Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 164.

23 John David Brewer, “Memory, Truth and Victimhood in Post-Trauma Societies,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, ed. G Delanty and Kumar (London: SAGE, 2006), 216.

24 Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser, “Remembering the Past in Diasporic Spaces: Kurdish Reflections on Genocide Memorialization for Anfal,” *Genocide Studies International* 13, no. 1 (2019): 10.

25 Jeffrey Blustein, “Conceptions of Genocide and the Ethics of Memorialization,” in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Memory*, ed. J. Lindert and A. T. Marsoobian (Cham: Springer, 2018), 36.

26 Suranjan Weeraratne, “Assessing the Many Faces of Transitional Justice in Timor-Leste,” in *Remembrance and Forgiveness: Global and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. A. Karamehić-Muratović and L. Kromjak (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 212.

27 Badema Pitic, “Musical Commemorations and Grand Narratives: The Case of the Oratorio ‘Srebrenički Inferno’ in Post-Genocide Bosnia,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 2 (2021): 466.

28 David Mwambari, “Music and the Politics of the Past: Kizito Mihigo and Music in the Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda,” *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6 (2019): 1321.

29 Steffi De Jong, *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums* (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 12-13.

30 Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103.

31 Doris L. Bergen, “Religion and Genocide: A Historiographical Survey,” in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. D. Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 215.

can be either a choice or an identity.³² In these situations when it is part of identity, it is inseparable from it and acts as a uniting factor. This bond is sometimes so strong that members of a group hardly differentiate their religious and ethnic identities.

The religious role in preserving collective memory includes several elements, including gathering people, protecting national identity, language, culture, and preventing assimilation among diasporic communities. Religion helps groups maintain a connection with their past, serving as a “chain of memory.”³³ If religion was one of the reasons for groups to suffer, like genocide, the connection between ethnicity and faith is even stronger. This relation can create a form of religious nationalism that “posits a sacred mythical relationship between worshipers, the past, and a territorially demarcated land.”³⁴ Armenians are an ethnoreligious group, where the Armenian Apostolic Church plays a vital role in their communal identity. Usually with ethnoreligious groups link is so strong that sometimes it looks as if there is no religion, and there would not be ethnicity either.³⁵ However, the role of the Church is much more than a pure expression of faith. The main role is actually preservation of Armenianness both in Armenia and the diaspora.

Due to its role in preserving cultural identity, religion often assumes heightened significance among diasporic communities compared to the homeland, transcending its primary function as an institution of faith.³⁶ Thus by its decision to canonize the victims of the Armenian Genocide and declare them as martyrs, the Church established a permanent link between religion, identity, and memory. The Church linked its past to its present, and with this tradition, it became a shaping narrative of the future.³⁷ With this action, the Church established a continuous cycle of remembrance, reconciliation, and renewal, reinforcing the Armenian identity and its determination to never forget its history and past and its collective traumas. Genocide became an integral part of the Church’s concerns, providing “individuals and groups a cross-generational sense of belonging in time.”³⁸ Memorial museums work in the same way—they want visitors to “identify with the victims, in this way instilling them with empathy and the ability to connect the past and its trauma to their own lives.”³⁹ Church has the same role and intends to connect its members with martyrs and their victim. This is especially the case with the Armenian diaspora,

32 Avigail Eisenberg, “Religion as Identity,” *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* 10, no. 2 (2016): 297.

33 Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 125.

34 Pnina Werbner, “Religious Identity,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Identities*, ed. M. Wetherell and C. Talpade Mohanty (London: SAGE, 2010), 254.

35 Steward Harrison Oppong, “Religion and Identity,” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 3, no. 6 (2013): 14.

36 Lori Peck, “Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity,” *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): 218.

37 Jakub Urbaniak, “Religion as Memory: How Has the Continuity of Tradition Produced Collective Meanings? - Part One,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 2.

38 Jeffrey R. Seul, “‘Ours in the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, and Inter-Group Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (1999): 561.

39 Harutyun Marutyan, *Commemorating the Armenian Genocide* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2026), 17.

which is under the constant risk of assimilation and loss of identity.

Panossian argues that the answer to the question “When a collective becomes a nation?” should be found in that collective’s past. In the Armenian case, that is genocide and post genocidal “diasporan existence.”⁴⁰ Of course, this does not mean that the Armenian collective was not a nation before the genocide. However, “historical memory can be either organic or dead: we can celebrate what we never experienced in reality, live and maintain such a past alive, or be alive only in historical records, the so-called cemeteries of knowledge.”⁴¹ Collective memory can bring those forgotten narratives and make them part of the collective identity. That is when traumatic events became an inseparable part of the main structure.

Methodology: Survey Design and Implementation

The methodology employed in this research centres on a survey designed to capture the perceptions and attitudes of Armenians, both within Armenia and across the diaspora (mostly Western), regarding the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the preservation of Armenian identity and the memory of the Armenian Genocide. The survey instrument was carefully crafted to elicit detailed responses on the multifaceted influence of the Church, incorporating a blend of quantitative and qualitative questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Also, in-person unstructured interviews were conducted.

Regarding the quantitative questions in the survey, all were designed on a 1 to 10 scale, 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest level of agreement. These questions were related to the perception of the Church’s importance, but also to the religiosity of respondents. For example, those questions were “How would you assess the importance of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide?” “Is the Armenian Apostolic Church the primary and most important institution for preserving Armenian identity?” and “How religious are you?” The final question is not intended to measure religiosity in a narrow or purely experiential sense; rather, it is designed to capture respondents’ broader relationship to religion as a social, cultural, and identity-forming framework.

Qualitative questions were designed to enable respondents to express their thoughts and considerations freely about the topic, providing detailed answers and adding new ideas and discussions about the role of the Church that researchers had not considered during the research design. For example, questions like: “In your opinion, what is the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide?” “Does the Armenian Apostolic Church in your community adequately take care of preserving

40 Razmik Panossian, “The Past as Nation: Three Dimensions of Armenian Identity,” *Geopolitics* 7, no. 2 (2002): 121-122.

41 Harutyun Marutyan, “Collective and Historical Memory in the Dialogue of Cultures,” *21-st Century* 2 (2007): 24.

the memory of the Armenian Genocide?” “If the Armenian Apostolic Church, both as a religious institution and a place of social gathering for Armenians, did not exist, would the memory of the genocide weaken over time? In other words, is the Church the one ensuring that the memory remains permanent and is passed on to younger generations?” “What is the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving Armenian identity?” and for those in diaspora, “If you live in the diaspora, what is the role of the Church in preserving your national identity and the identity of your descendants?” In-person interviews were unstructured, and respondents were allowed to speak freely on all of the topics mentioned above and their own experiences.

The survey had 132 respondents, including several interviewees. Surveys and interviews were conducted among Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. Armenians in Armenia were selected during my research stay in Yerevan in September 2024, as well as through online research. Armenians in diaspora were selected during my research stays in the USA, Australia, and via the internet in 2024 and 2025. In total, there were 22 respondents from Armenia, and 110 from the rest of the world.

Regarding the limitations, language was one of them, as the survey was conducted in English. This is one of the reasons for more responses received from the USA and English-speaking countries than from Armenia. Because of this, future research should focus more on Armenia and compare results with those presented in this research. Additionally, this survey primarily targeted the younger population, so it would be reasonable to conduct the survey again in the future to assess any potential changes in opinions between generations.

Survey Findings and Analysis

“The Church is the birthplace of our souls. She is the keeper of our hearts, our pains, our memories. The church no longer remembers those who died as ‘victims’ but as ‘martyrs for the faith.’ In that way, the Church has elevated their memory.”⁴²

Armenia

The survey results indicate that the average level of religiosity among respondents from Armenia, on a scale from 1 to 10, was 5.41. Approximately 36% of respondents rated their religiosity between 1 and 3, while 9% rated it between 4 and 6. Furthermore, a majority of 55% of respondents reported a high level of religiosity, with scores ranging from 7 to 10.

Regarding the rating of the Armenian Apostolic Church’s importance in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide, the average score on a scale of 1 to 10 was 6.91. The percentage of those who rated the importance of the Church from 1 to 3 is 23%. The percentage of those who rated the importance of the Church as 4 to 6 is 9%. A considerable proportion of the respondents, specifically 68%, indicated a strong conviction in the Church’s importance by assigning a rating between 7 and 10.

⁴² Armenian (Diaspora), R109.

The question related to whether the Armenian Apostolic Church is the primary and most important institution for preserving Armenian identity had an average of 5,32 on the scale from 1 to 10. 32% of respondents evaluated it as 1 to 3. 32% of respondents evaluated it as 4 to 6. 36% of respondents evaluated it as 7 to 10, meaning that only a third of respondents are in strong agreement that the Church is the most important source of identity.

These results indicate that Armenians from Armenia differ among themselves about the Church. Those opinions stretch from total disagreement with this institution to complete support.

Those who are not in agreement with the Church mainly state that the Church is a “political institution with no political power”⁴³ and that has a “minimal role”⁴⁴ in preserving Armenian collective memory related to genocide. One responder stated:

I believe the Armenian Apostolic Church is a completely rotten institution which has pimped out the memory of the Armenian Genocide for largely their own material benefit, and through our decrepit conservatism has effectively halted social progress of Armenians. They continue to portray Armenians as “victims” and memorialize them singularly like so, which, in my opinion, has helped create an inferiority complex in Armenians. Why not memorialize us as Victims AND Survivors? What about those who resisted?⁴⁵

This critique highlights dissatisfaction with the Church’s perceived self-serving actions and its role in perpetuating a victim mentality among Armenians.

Those rating Church’s role in preserving genocide memory with mid-range scores, note that “the church’s role is in preserving Armenian heritage and culture as it surrounds our Christian faith, I don’t agree that the church necessarily is preserving the memory of the deportations and exterminations. However, it is keeping that culture in far-off lands where Armenians fled and then settled, becoming a community centre around which, the Armenian people built.”⁴⁶ This view suggests that some see the Church as a heritage and culture protector, which is also seen as a part of collective memory.

On the other hand, those who are supportive of the Church note:

The Armenian Apostolic Church plays a significant role in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide in several ways. First, the Church is a place where the Armenian people gather to understand and remember their history. Major events such as Holy Week, Christmas, and various church commemorations and memorial services emphasise

43 Armenian (Armenia), R2.

44 Armenian (Armenia), R3.

45 Armenian (Armenia), R1.

46 Armenian (Armenia), R4.

the remembrance of the genocide, along with prayers dedicated to the souls of the victims.⁴⁷

Also, this large connection between genocide and religion is seen as:

definitely great, as commemoration is one of the main functions of religion. But we need to remember that the genocide is central *lieu de memoire* in Armenia for the last 100 years, and it developed as a sort of quasi-religion of its own—in this sense, I would say, genocide commemoration is somehow “competitive” with the Armenian Apostolic tradition as a national/civic religion.⁴⁸

Others also saw the role of the Armenian Church as “crucial,”⁴⁹ “important,”⁵⁰ and that it had a “key”⁵¹ role.

However, most of the respondents, regardless of their opinion about the Church, somehow agree that the Church on the local level does not always adequately take care of preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide.⁵² One respondent gave a detailed explanation of what Church means to him:

As a community member, I believe the Armenian Apostolic Church plays a vital role in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide, although its level of engagement can vary depending on the specific community.

1. Commemorative Services: In many Armenian communities, the Church organizes commemorative services on April 24, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, where members gather to honour the victims and reflect on the genocide. These services often include prayers, hymns, and messages from clergy that reinforce the importance of remembering the genocide.

2. Educational Efforts: In some communities, the Church also provides educational resources and supports initiatives that aim to educate younger generations about the genocide. This may include Sunday school programs, church-sponsored talks, or collaborations with local organisations that focus on genocide awareness.

3. Cultural Activities: The Church often organizes cultural events, such

47 Armenian (Armenia), R9.

48 Armenian (Armenia), R7.

49 Armenian (Armenia), R10

50 Armenian (Armenia), R14

51 Armenian (Armenia), R20.

52 Armenian (Armenia), R5 and R6.

as art exhibits, lectures, and concerts, that help raise awareness of the Armenian Genocide. These activities help foster a collective sense of identity and history within the community.

However, the effectiveness and scope of these efforts can differ across communities. In some areas, there might be more active engagement and resources dedicated to preserving the memory of the genocide, while in others, it may not be as emphasized, especially if the community is smaller or has fewer resources.

Overall, the Armenian Apostolic Church in many communities does play an essential role, but there is always room for further engagement, especially in reaching younger generations and expanding educational initiatives.⁵³

Respondents are also divided regarding the Church's role in preserving Armenian identity and memory about the genocide. They link the Church with religious identity and cultural heritage, but also note that the Church is more essential in diaspora. In Armenia, there are many other organizations that take care about this question, but in the diaspora, the Church is the one that connects Armenians to their roots.⁵⁴ However, the majority of Armenia-based Armenians still think that "Armenian identity is linked to being Christian and a follower of the Church."⁵⁵

Diaspora

Among Armenians in the diaspora, the situation is similar, but religiosity in the diaspora is slightly higher. Respondents rated their religiosity with an average score of 6,04 on a scale from 1 to 10. Those who rated their religiosity with marks from 1 to 3 compose 26,6% of respondents. From 4 to 6 marks were given by 21,1% of the respondents, and from 7 to 10 marks were given by 52,3%.

Regarding the importance of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide, the average score was 7,70 on a scale from 1 to 10, which means that Armenians in the diaspora consider the Armenian Church a very important institution in collective memory preservation. Only 7,3% of respondents gave marks from 1 to 3. Marks from 4 to 6 were given by 17,5% of respondents, and 75,2% gave marks from 7 to 10.

Respondents from diaspora averagely agreed that the Armenian Apostolic Church is the primary and most important institution for preserving Armenian identity, with a 6,95 score, which is significantly higher than in Armenia. 12,9% of respondents gave marks from 1 to 3, 27,8% marks from 4 to 6 and 59,3% marks from 7 to 10.

⁵³ Armenian (Armenia), R9.

⁵⁴ Armenian (Armenia), R11 and R21.

⁵⁵ Armenian (Armenia), R13.

A small number of those in diaspora who negatively look at the Church note that there is no role or it is not treating genocide in a unique way, different from any other community gatherings.⁵⁶ On the other hand, those who have a medium or positive attitude towards the Church's role in genocide memory preservation argue that its role is "preserving its memory through a religious lens in the history of the Armenian nation."⁵⁷ One respondent noted that Church had a "huge impact on my growing up in the Church as a child."⁵⁸

Another respondent gave a detailed explanation of what Church means to him: "From a cultural standpoint, the Armenian Church is a central beacon of the Armenian community amongst the diaspora. It reminds us of our faith, our language, and of our culture."⁵⁹ On the other hand, another respondent explained what it looks like when there is no Armenian Church in their community:

All religions engender 'community' and a sense of family. The Armenian Apostolic Church does this as well, and plays a critical role in preserving Armenian heritage, culture, the language, etc, particularly in the diaspora. I was not brought up in an area where there was a thriving Armenian community. There is a very small number of people in the area who have Armenian heritage, but without a "center place" for them to gather, to hear people speak the language, share traditional foods, sing traditional songs, dance to traditional music, etc, they don't really have a sense of Armenian "identity" other than knowing that their grandmother or great-grandmother was Armenian. Wherever there is an Armenian Church, there is a central place for the heritage and culture to be shared.⁶⁰

The church is also seen as a place of socialization and an "open space" for discussing topics that may be taboo within families. For example, one respondent noted that "especially in the diaspora, the Church is a place where the Armenian Genocide can't be forgotten and where diaspora Armenians can have a closer contact with their own history. Especially when one of our parents isn't Armenian. In my own family, no one talks about the Armenian Genocide and maybe going to the church would be a way to know better our history."⁶¹ Also, the Church has an educational role, because "the Church provides a place where we come together and remember each year. It is important for Armenians to be together and share stories. Sometimes there is a school attached to the

56 Armenian (Diaspora), R2, R5 and R7.

57 Armenian (Diaspora), R9.

58 Armenian (Diaspora), R14.

59 Armenian (Diaspora), R36.

60 Armenian (Diaspora), R42.

61 Armenian (Diaspora), R60.

Church. The students there are taught about the genocide alongside Armenian culture and history. A regular school doesn't do that."⁶² Diasporan Armenian people see the Church as an independent institution, not affected by politics and something eternal. The Armenian Apostolic Church has been the only institution that has been stably and constantly functioning for thousands of years. It is the only one that preserves all the human values; it unites all the Armenians together. The role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide is now essential.⁶³

Regarding the question whether the Armenian Apostolic Church adequately take care of preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide in respondents' communities, a majority of those who live in places where there is an Armenian Church responded positively, but often noted that more could be done. As one respondent observed:

The church organizes and participates in key events, such as the annual Armenian Genocide Commemoration. These events often include marches, memorial services, and gatherings at our Armenian Genocide Memorial and placing flowers on it, which helps to honour the memory of the victims. That said, whether it 'adequately' preserves the memory of the genocide might depend on individual perspectives. Though the Church's efforts might be seen as sufficient, I feel that more could be done. I personally believe more can be done particularly in terms of outreach to younger generations and educational programs as the younger generations may get a sense of the yearly events and attend them, but not fully comprehend why these yearly events take place, how the genocide has affected our nation to this day, and the full extent of the Armenian Genocide.⁶⁴

Opinions are mixed regarding the question of whether the memory of the genocide would weaken over time if the Armenian Apostolic Church did not exist. The main argument of those who say that the memory of the genocide would not weaken over time is that family and community are the guardians of that memory.⁶⁵ However, others note that "the church brings the community together and funding for school (Armenian education), and this is what makes a greater contribution to keeping the memory alive. This and what is learned at home."⁶⁶ From these responses, we may conclude that the Church is present, directly or indirectly, in the memory preservation process. Church is important, but "it is a place for the people to gather, but it will always be the people who

⁶² Armenian (Diaspora), R86.

⁶³ Armenian (Diaspora), R120.

⁶⁴ Armenian (Diaspora), R90.

⁶⁵ Armenian (Diaspora), R4, R12 and R15.

⁶⁶ Armenian (Diaspora), R32.

gather that keep the memory alive.”⁶⁷

The exact role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving Armenian identity is seen as “community building,”⁶⁸ “socializing with other Armenians,”⁶⁹ “preservation of Armenian Language and religion,”⁷⁰ and creation of a “united feeling of being Armenian Christians.”⁷¹ In essence, they agree that “if it wasn’t for the Armenian church, I don’t believe there would be a very clear Armenian culture or identity by today.”⁷² It is interesting that even those who were critical in previous responses now see the Church as a really important institution. As one respondent said, “Our faults were in our faith. Our faith is what kept us going.”⁷³

When asked what the Church means to them and their descendants, and how it affects their identity, many argue that the lack of a Church in their locations is a problem and has a negative impact on their identity. On the other hand, those who live close to active religious communities note that the Church “it’s the only place I feel tied to the Armenian community.”⁷⁴ One described the Church as “the primary institution with which I connect with my Armenian identity. It holds the tradition that I follow, which connects me with Armenianness.”⁷⁵

What Church means is best described in the response from one person who said:

my family and the Church are all I have that keeps me connected to my roots. It helps pass on national identity by nurturing our traditions, history, culture, and providing spiritual and communal support. It is also the only other place, aside from my home, where I can speak the Armenian language with others. I believe the church ensures that the Armenian identity remains alive for future generations. When I was younger, Sunday school helped shape my ethics, values, and customs, and as an adult, attending church helps me preserve them.⁷⁶

At the end, it could be concluded that “there is no Armenia without the Church” as noted by one respondent.⁷⁷

67 Armenian (Diaspora), R130.

68 Armenian (Diaspora), R5.

69 Armenian (Diaspora), R17.

70 Armenian (Diaspora), R8.

71 Armenian (Diaspora), R10.

72 Armenian (Diaspora), R13.

73 Armenian (Diaspora), R62.

74 Armenian (Diaspora), R71.

75 Armenian (Diaspora), R73.

76 Armenian (Diaspora), R90.

77 Armenian (Diaspora), R80.

Discussion: The Church's Role in Post-Genocide Identity and Memory

People have “right to know”⁷⁸ about their sufferings. State and non-state actors are the main guarantors of this right. Non-states actors are NGO-s, societies and other interest groups, and also Church. We can say that non-state actors are in some cases even more important, for example, in the Armenian case, and especially in the case of the Armenian diaspora. Also, the uniqueness of the Armenian diaspora in the West is also the fact that its majority is formed by descendants of genocide survivors from Western Armenia, who also formed a unique form of Armenian identity and point of view that does not always align with the point of view that comes from the Armenian state.⁷⁹ The Armenian state is a newcomer in the discussions on identity, as the Armenian identity existed centuries without a state at all. However, “the best monument to the (genocide victims) memory is the resurrection of the Republic of Armenia.”⁸⁰

However, both places of martyrdom,⁸¹ and places of new communities in distant countries have become the basis for Armenian identity, where the Church plays a very essential role. Armenian identity and its relation to genocide, especially in the diaspora, are very complex with various layers and forms, and affect people in various ways.⁸²

During the decades after the genocide, many survivors refused to talk about their traumatic experiences.⁸³ This created the gap, and many memories were forgotten. However, with socialization and the communal role of the Church, many were able to trace their roots and regain knowledge that had been forgotten. That was an almost century-long “struggle to preserve Armenianness after the forceful eviction from a historical homeland to a strange host country.”⁸⁴ This research aimed to track this struggle and its potential benefits and weaknesses.

Religiosity is slightly higher in the diaspora than in Armenia, with an average religiosity of 6.04 in the diaspora compared to 5.41 in Armenia (Figure 1). Therefore, we can conclude that the religious factor remains almost the same. The reason why Armenians in diaspora are more religious can be found in other responses and can be concluded that higher religiosity comes from more frequent interaction with the Church because of its side communal activities.

78 Richard J. Wilson, “Restoration of Historical Memory and Dignity for Victims of the Armenian Genocide,” *International Criminal Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 336.

79 Sossie Kasbarian, “The Politics of Memory and Commemoration: Armenian Diasporic Reflections on 2015,” *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 1 (2018): 137.

80 Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (University of California Press, 1993), 189.

81 Shushan Khachatryan, Hayk Hakobyan, and Garnik Harutyunyan, “Identification and Identity: Quest for the Armenian Martyrdom Sites in the Modern Times,” *Scrinium* 19 (2023): 276.

82 Dmitry Chernobrov and Leila Wilmers, “Diaspora Identity and a New Generation: Armenian Diaspora Youth on the Genocide and the Karabakh War,” *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 5(2020): 921.

83 Harutyun Marutyan, “Museums and Monuments: Comparative Analysis of Armenian and Jewish Experiences in Memory Policies,” *Etudes Armeniennes Contemporaines* 3 (2014): 60-61.

84 Sevan Beukian, “Motherhood as Armenianness: Expressions of Femininity in the Making of Armenian National Identity,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2014): 262-263.

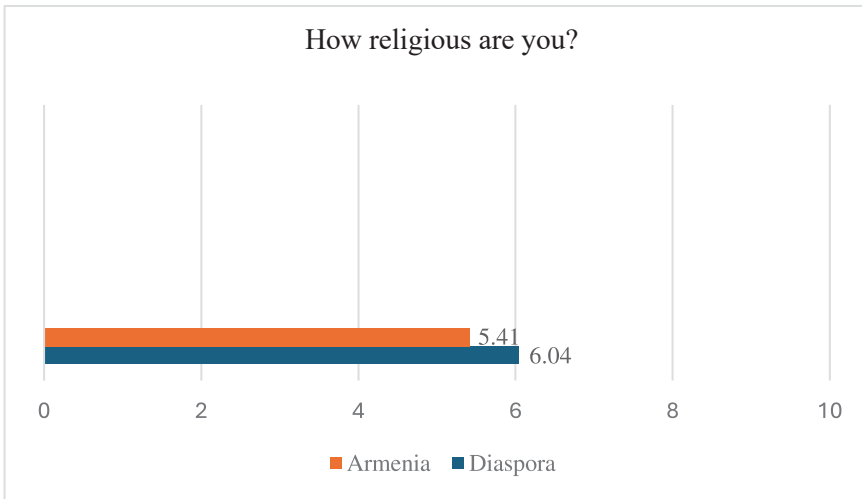


Figure 1: Religiosity

Armenians in the diaspora also see the Armenian Apostolic Church as a more important institution in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide (Figure 2). The average response for this question in the diaspora is 7.70, compared to 6.91 in Armenia. This is mainly due to the fact that in Armenia, many other institutions deal with the Armenian Genocide, while in the diaspora, this is almost entirely limited to the Church and its events and commemorations. Also, spending time with other Armenians and talking about stories related to the genocide is a way of preserving and transmitting memories.

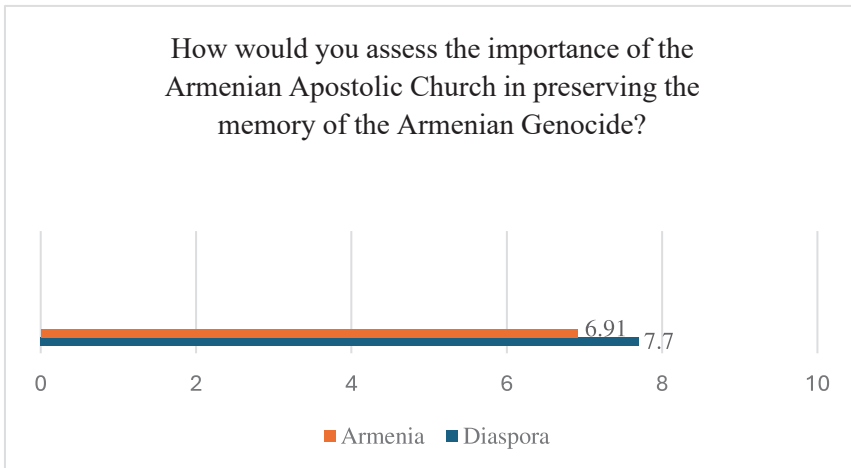


Figure 2: Perception of the importance of the Church regarding the memory preservation

However, the most significant difference in perception is the Armenians in different countries' position on the Armenian Church regarding its importance for preserving Armenian identity (Figure 3). Armenians in Armenia are not as reliant on the Church, giving it a score of only 5,32, while Armenians in the diaspora, with a score of 6,95, consider the Church their most important institution in this process. This is also due to

the majority of institutions and the Armenian Government in Armenia, as a nucleus of Armenian identity. In the diaspora, where communities are on their own and constantly fear assimilation, the Church is the centre and the safest place to express and learn about Armenian identity.

This is also encouraged by the very unique behaviour of Armenians in the diaspora. Their phenomenon of “dual loyalties” has been noted for a long time. In essence, Armenians in diaspora tend to be highly incorporated into the cultures of the countries where they live, while also continuing to express their strong Armenian national identity and pride in their closed family or communal gatherings, including religious ones.⁸⁵

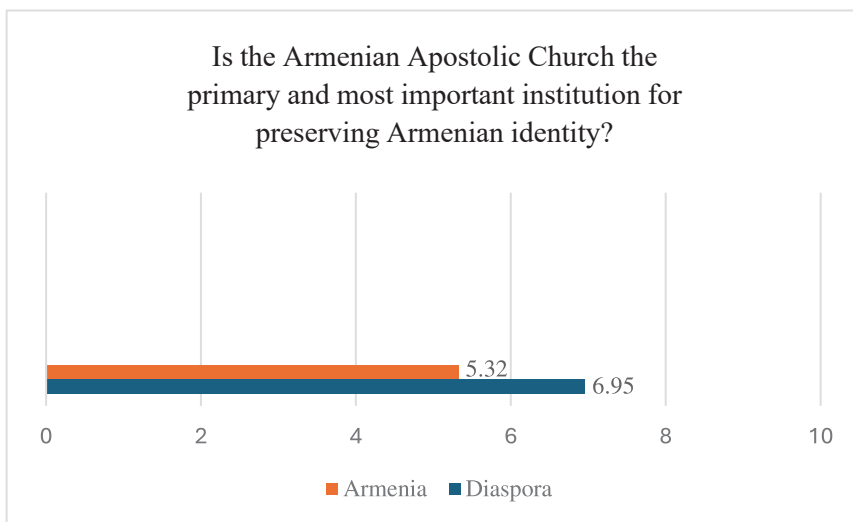


Figure 3: Perception of the importance of the Church regarding the identity preservation

The generation of genocide survivors is gone, so the question is how future generations are going to be influenced by memories about genocide and survival? What the research reveals is that most people in the diaspora rely heavily on the Church. Previous research⁸⁶ has shown that family and family members are the main source of narratives, but in the future, the Church tends to be the only place of communal memory.

Now, the main source of memory is the process of “remembering together,”⁸⁷ gathering, talking, and preserving identity. During the genocide, Ottomans were forcing Armenian children to forget their Armenian names.⁸⁸ Commuting and sharing stories

⁸⁵ Duygu Gul Kaya, “Memory and Citizenship in Diaspora: Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Canada,” *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 4 (2018): 401.

⁸⁶ Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, “Memory and Identity Across the Generations: A Case Study of Armenian Survivors and Their Progeny,” *Qualitative Sociology* 14, no. 1 (1991): 19.

⁸⁷ A. T. Marsoobian, “Collective Memory, Memorialization and Bearing Witness in the Aftermath of the Armenian Genocide,” in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Memory*, ed. A. T. Marsoobian and J. Lindert (Springer, 2018): 307.

⁸⁸ Gzoyan et al., “In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage,” 254. See also Edita Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, and Shushan Khachatryan. “Reclaiming Children after the Armenian Genocide: Neutral House in Istanbul,”

within Church gatherings ensure that Armenians will never again forget their names. As people increasingly engage and participate in these groups and places where collective memory is shared, they become more aware of themselves and who they are.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Armenian Apostolic Church has historically served as a crucial institution in preserving Armenian identity, particularly in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide. Its unique position in the creation of Armenian ethnoreligious identity made the Church inseparable from the fate of Armenia and the Armenian people both in the country and its large diaspora all around the world. The Church became the source of identity and collective memory, while also serving as the protector and preserver of these two elements. This is especially the case in the Armenian diaspora, where other institutions that exist in Armenia but not in diaspora, have small influence? In the diaspora, the Church is typically the only institution responsible for preserving Armenian identity and keeping Armenians connected to their roots.

This research reveals nuanced perceptions within the Armenian community regarding the Church's role in post-genocidal identity formation and memory preservation. The main findings emphasise that the Church is not only a religious institution but also an important social and cultural centre, especially in diaspora communities. Armenians in the diaspora view the Church as significantly more important than their compatriots in Armenia, as other institutions are also present in Armenia. However, even in Armenia, sentiment towards the Church and its role is generally favourable. The survey responses indicate a strong consensus that the Church plays a significant role in maintaining Armenian identity and genocide memory preservation through language, religion, education and cultural traditions.

The Church and its link with genocide and identity have not been a subject of much research in the past. Further research might explore its connection to younger generations and analyze concrete actions taken among diasporic communities. Additionally, the Church's role in advocacy and political activism related to genocide recognition should be explored in more detail. More fieldwork, both in Armenia and the diaspora, should be conducted, utilizing qualitative interviews and ethnographic studies. Additional scholarship might examine more closely the role of priests in memory, identity, and genocide.

This research aimed to contribute to empirical foundations for understanding the complex dynamics between religion, identity, and collective memory in the context of post-genocidal societies. The findings underscore the significance of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a pivotal institution for Armenians in both Armenia and the diaspora,

Holocaust and Genocide Studies 33, no. 3 (2019): 395-411.

89 Harutyun Marutyan, "The Memory Management Issue," *21-st Century* 1 (2007): 93.

providing valuable insights into how religious institutions can shape identity and preserve cultural heritage. The Armenian Apostolic Church continues to be the most important national institution among the Armenian people, especially those in diaspora, which ensures that the Armenian identity remains alive for future generations.

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THE “TURKISH IDEOLOGY”: FROM ABDUL HAMID II TO ERDOGAN’S TURKEY

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Abstract

This article examines the long-term continuity of what may be called the “Turkish ideology” from the Hamidian period to Erdogan’s Turkey, arguing that beyond changes in regimes, elites, and political vocabularies, a durable ideological and institutional matrix has structured state violence and perceptions of internal enemies. By tracing the internal transmissions between Hamidianism, Unionism, Kemalism, and contemporary nationalist-Islamism, the article highlights the persistence of a state-centered worldview shaped by social Darwinist assumptions, racialized conceptions of nationhood, and the logic of *raison d’état*. Through a comparative reading of 1914-1915 and 2014-2015, it demonstrates how similar mechanisms of exclusion, coercion, and enemy construction were mobilized against Armenians and later against Kurds. The study further questions the analytical adequacy of concepts such as “late Ottoman Empire” and “Neo-Ottomanism,” suggesting instead that the continuity lies less in imperial restoration than in the enduring ideological foundations of Turkish state praxis.

Keywords: Turkish ideology; Armenian Genocide; Kemalism; Erdoganism; continuity of state violence

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Late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey: A Brief History

The Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896, the Ilinden massacre in Macedonia in 1903, the 1909 Adana massacres, the 1915 Genocide, which targeted namely but not exclusively the Armenian community across Asia Minor, the 1915-1916 "reign of terror" in the Arab world, the 1919 Pontus genocide, the 1920-1921 campaigns in order to destroy the extremely fragile Armenian Republic, and the republican massacres of the Kurds, including the 1938 Dersim genocide, organized by Unionist cadres converted to Kemalism, the brutal invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Ankara's massive military support to Baku in Nagorno-Karabakh, and mass violence against the Kurds in Turkey and Rojava... How could such an inexhaustible force of destruction maintain itself over such a long period, and how can one explain that a state ideology, which is entirely synonymous with state praxis, could have been kept alive with its "memorial regimes"¹ from the end of the 19th century to the first quarter of the 21st century?

The answer to these questions lies, at least in part, in the continuity and internal transmissions between the state's structures and/or the men from the Hamidian period to our days. It is true that the Unionists did not only overthrow Abdul Hamid II (1909) but also his main bureaucrats; yet they were children of Hamidianism, and for most of them, its coercive agents in Ottoman Macedonia. They had been formed in its military or medical schools, where they initiated themselves into Social Darwinism, and had a love-hate relationship with him. In 1917, Talaat, the mastermind of the genocide, paid a visit to the fallen Sultan: "I was saddened to realize the true nature of the legacy he had left us only now, at this very moment when the ruins [of the Empire] began to fall on our heads. As a consolation, he told me that the verdict of history does not change."² The infamous Bahaeddin Shakir, the operational architect of the genocide, too, celebrated him as the "only Übermensch," i.e., a superior man able to transcend the ordinary human condition of the Empire.³ And when the "Red Sultan," whom they wanted the death during their opposition years, passed away a couple of months later, they all mourned him in tears.

The Kemalists were, for their overwhelming majority, members, ideologues, or operative cadres of Unionism. Abdulhalik Renda and Shukru Kaya, for instance, who were in charge of the Kurdish politics of the Kemalist Republic, had been active members of Talaat Pasha's ministerial team, as well as organizers of the Armenian Genocide. As Tuncay Sur shows in his PhD thesis,⁴ unlike the founders of the Republic, who were mostly from the Balkans, the post-1960s generations of Turkish leaders were born in Asia Minor, and many of them had conservative or Islamized nationalist worldviews. But they were either educated by the Kemalist state institutions, including the military

1 Duygu Tasalp, *Cent ans de négation. Les régimes mémoriels en Turquie de l'Unionisme à l'islamisme* (Paris: Karthala, 2025).

2 Cemal Kutay, *Şehit Sadrazam Talaat Paşa'nın Gurbet Hatıraları* (Istanbul: s.n., 1983), 16 and 847.

3 Cited in Raymond H. Kévorkian, *Le génocide des Arméniens* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), 244.

4 Tuncay Sur, "Redefining the Kurdish Question: A Socio-Historical Analysis of Turkey's Nationalist and Conservative Intelligentsia in the Late Twentieth Century" (PhD diss, EHESS, 2026).

ones, or were strongly influenced by the state's security-based discourses. Moreover, the mainstream conservative movements had developed their own *conspiratorial* narratives concerning Turkey's past, reading it as an unending Western and/or Jewish plot to destroy the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. The Islamists of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP*), who took power in the wake of the November 2002 elections, were certainly not Kemalists, but they shared the idea of the superiority of Islamic Turkishness or of a Turkified Islam and accepted, although subconsciously, the fundamental assumptions of Social Darwinism.

What one could call the "Turkish ideology" can take diverse aspects, from the most radicalized nationalist ones to the "left-wing" oriented ones, constitutes indeed the structuring ground of state policies. However, it also allows the formation of a hegemonic bloc on Turkey's "sensitive issues."⁵ This ideology is certainly not powerful enough to allow the suppression of internal conflicts among the Kemalists, Islamists, nationalists, and leftwing movements, but it is federative enough to offer a common ground for these different "families": either racist-ethnicist Kemalists or "modernists," the nationalists can define the "minorities" as the internal enemies of Turkishness; the nationalist-Islamists or conservatives can consider them as infidels at the service of foreign powers; and the left-wing movements can designate them as simple tools of "imperialists". One should bear in mind that in his letters to the Soviet leader Lenin, Mustafa Kemal himself frequently used the concept of "imperialism," but his first strategic goal was to crush independent Armenia, this "insulant and ingrate race" (17.9.1919).⁶

Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist and poet, is without any doubt the intellectual who has incarnated the "Turkish Ideology" in its most radical form and left a long-lasting legacy. Born in Diyarbakir in 1876, Gökalp became a young opponent of Abdul Hamid, and after the overthrow of the Sultan, imposed himself as the principal ideologue of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). A proud advocate of the extermination of the Armenians, he was arrested by the British after the occupation of Istanbul and jailed in Malta for a short period, but was released when London recognized the Ankara government of Mustafa Kemal. He also played a decisive role during the inception period of the People's Republican Party of Kemal.⁷ His 100th anniversary was widely celebrated in 1976 by the then-ruling "Nationalist Front" of Süleyman Demirel. As we will see on various occasions in this article, in the long run, one can consider Republican Turkey as more profoundly "Gökalpist" than simply Kemalist.

⁵ Hamit Bozarslan, "Ontologie, vitalisme et délivrance : quelques pistes de recherche sur le négationnisme d'Ankara," *Résomances* 5 (2023): 40-44.

⁶ İsmet Gorgu, *Atatürk'ten Ermeni Sorunu* (Ankara, Bilgi Yayınevi, 2002), 93.

⁷ Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Europe's Seminal Proto-Fascist? Historically Approaching Ziya Gökalp, Mentor of Turkish Nationalism," *Die welt des Islams* 61, no. 4 (2021): 411-447.

1914/1915 and 2014/2015: Sharp Similarities

The existence of a "Turkish ideology" can explain that in spite of brutal, and in some cases extremely violent shifts within the ruling cadres belonging either to the well-educated and wealthy "élites" or coming from the plebeian strata, the *raison d'état*, the famous *hikmet-i hükümet*, remains intact and can even be radicalized when the power-holders deem that *Kairos* offers them an important opportunity to "resolve" what they consider a vital question, compromising the very existence of the "Turkish nation". The comparison of the Unionist politics vis-à-vis the Armenians in 1914 and the AKP politics vis-à-vis the Kurds in 2014 sheds a cruel and yet crucial light on this double phenomenon of violent rupture and radicalized continuity.

In 1908, in spite of the fact that it was still inexperienced and did not master all the levers of the state apparatus, the CUP was able to dismantle the entire Hamidian state within a couple of months; the old generals, governors, and diplomats with decades of careers behind them were replaced by those who were around 30. Yet the CUP had no other *raison d'état* to perpetuate than the one it had inherited from Hamidianism. This *raison d'Etat* could not be maintained without being radicalized through the incredible energy of the Unionist leaders, but also thanks to the Social-Darwinist learning that created a feeling of urgency among them. This ideology was already there, aggressively one should say, with its threats of using exterminatory violence as Djemal openly expressed them in 1913, and was taking the Armenian community into hostage.⁸ The only thing that was missing was the moment of *Kairos*, "God of the opportune time," which offered itself with the perspectives of the irruption of the Great War and the Dashnak Congress of Summer 1914.

No doubt that between 1908 and 1913/1914, the CUP legalized their political parties. In spite of the Adana massacres, there was also a *de facto* alliance between the CUP and the Dashnaksutyun, which lasted at least until the end of 1912. In exchange for this recognition, however, it urged them to enter the service, not of the Ottoman Empire, but of the Turkish nation. In the conditions of summer 1914, this claim was not limited to the sole Ottoman Empire but also concerned Russia. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation refused this demand, explaining that the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire would certainly accomplish their "duty" vis-à-vis their homeland, but that they would not organize any kind of subversion on the other side of the border nor mobilize the Russian Armenians against their country. This refusal created conditions in which the genocidal option ceased to be a simple threat as Djemal formulated it in 1913, and became a feasible process: indeed, the CUP henceforth had a *casus belli*, a concrete "proof" that the Armenians were "betraying" their "homeland."⁹ As we know, the genocide, in fact, did not start in April 1915 but already in the winter of 1914, in the wake of this summer Congress and the first military backsets on the Caucasian front.

8 Quoted in Gaïdz F. Minassian, "Les relations entre le Comité Union et Progrès et la Fédération Révolutionnaire Arménienne à la veille de la Première Guerre mondiale d'après les sources arméniennes," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 1(1995): 37.

9 Arthur Beylerian, *Les grandes puissances, l'Empire ottoman et les Arméniens dans les archives françaises (1914-1918)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1983), XXV.

As it is well-known, the Armenian community has been annihilated along with its identity, subjectivities, history, capacity to read itself in the present as a component of the Ottoman Empire, which its political leaders wanted to rebuild on new and egalitarian principles, and its ability to project itself into the future. Indeed, the Armenians were not killed because they “betrayed” their homeland: the number of Armenian *fedayi*, among them a majority of non-Ottoman Armenians, joining the Russian Army did not exceed, according to the Ottoman-Turkish estimations, 8,000 men, compared to 13 million troops mobilized by the Russian Army during the war. Similarly, there was no Armenian revolt to “stab the homeland in the back” in any part of the Empire, Van and Urfa included. The Armenians were exterminated because their “homeland” considered them as “foreign” or a “biological threat” to the nation.¹⁰

One hundred years after the genocide, one faces a similar scenario concerning the Kurds. Obviously, the context of 2014-2015 was not a genocidal one, but it presented many similarities to that of 1914-1915. First, the AKP regime had succeeded in dismantling the post-Kemalist state in a relatively short period, and after more than one decade in power, it seemed to be unchallenged. Second, as the Unionists who had recognized the existence of the Armenians, condemned the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s, and legalized their political parties as well as their institutions, the AKP, too, had accomplished an act of recognition, accepted the existence of the Kurds, and even condemned the injustices that they had been victims of under the Republic, such as the mass violence of 1938-1939 in Dersim. In turn, the Kurds were asked to serve the Sunni Turkish nation and the regime, not only in Turkey but also in Syria. That meant that the Kurds should stop having an identity separate from the Turkish-Islamic one, a will, and an agency, and even less exist as a collective subject, i.e., *für sich*. The Kurdish refusal to obey this injunction led to the tragedy of Kobane (2014), during which the AKP government had de facto collaborated with ISIS and the end of the so-called “2013-2015 Peace Process.” Thus, Ankara deployed massive coercion against the Kurdish militants and did not hesitate to destroy urban centers, as in Cizre and in Diyarbakir’s historical mural area. As there was no Armenian betrayal nor any Armenian separatism in 1914, in 2014-2015 there was no Kurdish “betrayal” nor any Kurdish separatism. Like the Armenian political parties during the late Ottoman period, the Kurdish actors simply wanted to rebuild Turkey on a new and egalitarian basis.

A “Late Ottoman Empire”?

It is commonplace to use the concept of the “late Ottoman Empire” to describe the post-Tanzimat period (1876-1918/1922). Many scholars also define the Erdoganist policies as “Neo-Ottomanist.” In reality, the concept of empire can hardly be applied to the post-

¹⁰ For the Social-Darwinist and explicitly anti-Armenian arguments in the “Turkish ideology” under the Unionist, Kemalist and post-Kemalist regimes, see, namely, Hamit Bozarslan, Vincent Duclert & Raymond Kévorkian, *Comprendre le génocide des Arméniens* (Paris: Editions Tallandier, 2015).

Hamidian period. My impression is that after the devastating "93 War" (1877-1878), Abdul Hamid was aware that what remained of the Ottoman Balkans could be lost and, to some extent, mourned it in anticipation. He, as well as his state apparatus had an imaginary of Asia Minor composed of a Turkish nucleus, protected by an Islamic periphery including the Kurds. In the eyes of Abdul Hamid, the non-Turkish lands of the empire constituted simply the Ottoman colonies.¹¹ Hamidianism could not accept the biological materialism as it was advocated by Ernst Haeckel, Georg Büchner, Ludwig Woltmann, or Georges Vacher de Lapouge, which denied the very principle of the existence of God; but it did not reject Social Darwinism, which considers nations as quasi-biological species struggling for survival and advocates that only the strongest could survive.¹²

The Balkans were indeed lost in 1912-1913. The First Balkan War ended with a collective humiliation, including for the CUP, which was not in power during this period but had been involved in a very aggressive pro-war campaign. After the war, the CUP, which seized power through a coup d'état (23 January 1913), had the opportunity to envision the future of the Ottoman lands as a plural empire, integrating its major communities—Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, and Kurds—through a social contract. Sabahaddin, Lutfi Fikri, and Shériff Pasha... were among the liberal figures calling for a decentralization of the empire and a profound transformation of the "social structures" of the Turkish community. A disciple of Edmond Demolins, the main figure of the "School of Social Sciences," Sabahaddin also insisted on the necessity of demilitarizing the very self-perception of Turkishness. Instead, the CUP, dominated by young officers and some civilian figures of the Turkish intelligentsia, opted for an extremely radicalized Turkist line, advocated mainly by Ziya Gökalp. Turkism had always been present in the CUP's ideological identity ever since its opposition years,¹³ and had become almost official after the 1908 boycotting movement of Austrian goods, which transformed itself into a boycotting praxis against Asia Minor's Christian merchants. This current, which defined Turkishness not only as the dominant ethnic group but as an exclusively dominating group, had also developed a worldview in which this "Great but Disparate (Turkish) Race"¹⁴ was presented as a victim, as a Third Estate (Tiers État) or a "proletarian nation" oppressed by the Greek and Armenian "ethno-classes." It designated the Armenians and Greeks, who were subjected to ethnic cleansing already by 1913, as internal enemies of Turkishness; the Arabs as a colonized people and the Kurds, who were themselves oppressed during the Bitlis uprising of Mullah Selim in 1914, as proxies. Ziya Gökalp, already the theorist-in-

11 Cf. Selim Deringil, *Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

12 "Le Moment moderne de l'islam' ou ce que les réformistes doivent aux traditionnalistes: quelques remarques sur l' 'islamisme' ottoman," in P. Vermereen & P. Petriat (dir.), *Une histoire du Proche-Orient au temps présent. Etudes en hommage à Nadine Picaudou* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 2015), 163-178.

13 Sukru Hanioglu, "Turkishness and the Young Turks, 1889-1908," in *Turkey Beyond Nationalism. Towards Post-National Identities*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (Londres, I.B. Tauris, 2006), 8-9.

14 Umit Kurt, "Türk'ün Büyük Biçare Irkı." *Türk Yurdu'nda Milliyetçiliğin Esasları (1911-1916)* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012).

chief of the Committee, played a decisive role in this evolution, which culminated in the well-studied episode of the genocide.

This genocide was a largely assumed act of mass violence. It is true that the architects of the genocide and their successors at the head of the Turkish state publicly denied the very existence of genocide of 1915, but as many Unionist and Kemalist documents attest, they were in reality absolutely proud of having exterminated the Armenians.¹⁵ Many Unionists reminded even that they were ready to start again.¹⁶ In 1918, in Yerevan, Halil Pasha, one of the leading military commanders and well-known Unionist figures, addressed a message not only to the Armenian Republic but broadly speaking to the “Armenian nation,” in which he made the most complete confession of a proud responsibility for the guilt:

O Armenian nation, with whom I collaborated to overthrow an oppressor *padişah* [Sultan Abdul Hamid II] and to found a free and happy homeland! O Armenian nation that I tried to wipe out until the last member because you tried to erase my homeland and make her a prisoner of the enemy when she lived her most terrible and painful days. ... If you remain faithful to the Turkish homeland, I will do everything at my disposal for you. But if you again follow certain unconscious *comitadji* [of their acts] and try to betray the Turkish homeland, I will give the order to my arms surrounding your homeland, and I will not leave a single Armenian on the surface of the earth.¹⁷

An Erdoganist “Neo-Ottomanism”?

A century later, Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears to be the one who expresses best the very essence of Turkish ideology. The Turkish President has never taken any personal risks in his life, but he emphasizes often in his discourses that “a land can become a homeland only on the condition of being watered by blood.” He is also known for his great admiration for the Ottoman legacy, for the three “Great Sultans” (Mehmed the Conqueror, Selim I, and Suleiman the Magnificent) and for Abdul Hamid II. According to him, “our homeland,” which covered either 18 or 20 million square kilometers, has been reduced to its actual size of 780,000 as a consequence of external aggressions and internal betrayals. By this, he does not mean that only Turks lived in this Empire, but that the Empire was the *homeland* exclusively to the Turks, the other linguistic and religious communities being there almost as hosts, whose existence was, so to say, tolerated by the Turkish nation. The CUP ideologist Gokalp, according to whom the nation could be incarnated only by the

15 See, namely, Taner Akcam, “Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur”. *Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008).

16 For an extensive documentation, see Akcam, “*Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur*.”

17 Halil Kut, “Eylül 1918’de Erivan ve Ermeniler,” in *Ermeniler Hakkında “Makaleler-Derlemeler”* (Erzurum: Erzurum Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1978), 150-151.

genius (to start with himself) and heroes such as Talaat and Enver, assigned a mystical attribute to Turkishness. Erdogan, too, sees himself as the very incarnation of the Turkish nation; similarly, according to him, Turkishness had received, in its very inception, the historical mission to dominate the world. This mission has also been certified by God and by science: it consists of bringing civilization, administration, and harmony to the universe, but the accomplishment of this mission requires heroism, a sacrificial spirit, and the ability to wage war. According to the Turkish President, war has been a part of human history since Abel and Cain, and will remain so until the end. Behind this theological interpretation, one can, however, easily see the legacy of Social Darwinism describing nations as biological foes engaged in a struggle for survival.

In his own time, Gokalp insisted that Turkishness was determined by its unchanging *hars*, a term, which, in his definition, designates more "essence" than culture. The nation, according to Erdogan too, is determined by its ontology, which ensures its durability, explains its force understood as a *Macht* as the 19th-century German geopoliticians defined it, and not only as power, and is incarnated in a leader. Gokalp considered himself a distant disciple of the founder of French sociology Émile Durkheim, but was strongly opposed to the Westernization of the country, if not through simple initiation into the technological and scientific civilization of the West. Notwithstanding Turkey's alliance with the USA and his strong personal links with American President Donald Trump, Erdogan, who ignores the very name of Durkheim, is also profoundly anti-Western and explains even the country's demographic decline as a Western plot against the Turkish-Islamic nation. In reality, like the Social-Darwinist CUP cadres, he too is profoundly westernized: while he strongly rejects liberal European traditions, he replicates in his discourses the syntax of Western radical rights of the 1920s-1930s. According to the Turkish President, while always remaining immaculate, the ontology of the Turkish nation is constantly threatened by external forces, namely the West, as well as by internal betrayals, those of the non-Muslim communities that it protected, some Muslims who have been manipulated by external forces, and last but not least, by the Turkish elites themselves, who, through their westernization, have alienated themselves from their own nation. Thus, the recovery of this ontology at a collective level appears to be a precondition for the future strength of the nation.

During the years, Erdogan underlined the importance of three symbolic dates, or rather commemorative moments, in the understanding of the history of the Turkish nation and in the shaping of its future. The first one is 2023, the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Erdogan has always had an ambiguous position vis-à-vis this Republic, which, on the one hand, stopped the process of decline of Turkishness, but on the other hand, has renounced claiming back past territorial losses. Moreover, the Republic was founded by the alienated or westernized elites, who denied their past, criminalized the very legacy of the Empire, and abolished the caliphate. In spite of this ambivalence, the Republic constitutes, in his eyes, a historical landmark. The commemorations of 2023, however, have been dull and colorless, not least because the longstanding promises of Erdogan to

transform Turkey into one of the ten major powers in the world have not been fulfilled.

The second date, yet to come, is 2053, the 600th anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople, which allowed the Ottomans to realize their transition from a simple Turkish *beylicat* (“principality”) coexisting with others in Minor Asia into an Empire, thus assuming the legacy, on the one hand, of the past Islamic Empires, and on the other hand, of the deceased Roman and Byzantine Empires. The last date is 2071, the 1000th anniversary of the Battle of Manazkert, the first Turkish military victory against Byzantium, which opened the doors of Asia Minor to the Turkish forces, thus constituting the beginning of the Turkish historical mission. Erdogan reminds quite frequently that the nation is divided between the friends and foes of 2071, the final moment of not only the ontological recovery but also of renewed strength, a new historical mission.

Republican Turkey One Century Later: a “New Life”?

The consequences of such a worldview are huge both in terms of state’s coercion and mass violence, as we mentioned at the beginning of this article, and in terms of perception of time and space. For many decades, in its secret reports, republican Turkey recognized the existence of the Kurds and defined them as internal, if not biological, enemies. In its external discourse, however, it simply denied their existence.¹⁸ This was even more the case for the Armenians and the Greeks, who were not only expelled from space through mass violence, but also from time. In his well-known speech in Adana in 1924, Mustafa Kemal emphasized strongly that the Armenians had no historical existence in Turkey. In response to a question from one of the auditors, Kemal said:

Our friend said that different groups, including Armenians, have occupied our artistic homes and act as if they are the owners of this country. There is no doubt that one cannot imagine a greater injustice and a greater insolence. Armenians have no rights in this prosperous country. The country is yours, you Turks. This country was Turkish in history, remains Turkish now, and will therefore be eternally Turkish and live as a Turkish country. The country was, finally, liberated by the hands of its true owners. Armenians and others have no rights here. These fertile lands are overwhelmingly and in essence a Turkish country.¹⁹

¹⁸For the documents, see Mehmet Bayrak, *Kürtler ve Ulusal Demokratik Mücadeleleri. Gizli Belgeler - Araştırmalar - Notlar* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1993). See also Mehmet Bayrak, *Açık-Gizli / Resmi- Gayriresmi Kürdoloji Belgeleri* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1994).

¹⁹Quoted in Rıfat N. Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri. Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923-1945)* (İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2000).

In place of a conclusion

The constancies that we observe in Turkish history since Abdul Hamid II constitute an illustration of the master and slave dialectic: the master cannot live without slave, or rather without internal enemies and “betrayers,” thanks to whom he can have an identity, an ego, an existence. He is obviously dominant, but the more he vanquishes and the more he dominates, the more he is scared; the more he needs to remind himself that he has enemies.

In his well-known poem “New Life,” CUP’s Ziya Gokalp, wrote:

A country where the ideal, language, and religion are common to each of its individuals. Clean are its deputies. Where the Bochos [anti-nationalist Greek-Ottoman deputy] do not have the right to speak. A country where Turkish is all the capital that circulates in its market, just like the science and technology that guide its industry. Its merchants help each other. The arsenals, factories, ships, and trains belong to the Turks! There you are, son of Turks... This is your country.²⁰

More than one hundred years later, while violence remains a constant element of a society paralyzed by economic crisis and a permanent feeling of internal and external insecurity, this ideal of “pure” and “new” life seems to be more difficult to reach than ever.

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²⁰ Ziya Gokalp, *Yeni Hayat, Doğru Yol* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1976), 11.

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BOOK REVIEW

Haroutioun K. Atanassian, *Անաքազարէն Տէր Զոր* [From Adapazar to Der Zor]. Editor, author of the preface and references Mihran A. Minassian, Yerevan: AGMI, 2025, 568 pages.

Mihran Minassian

Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

More than a century after the Armenian Genocide, despite decades of scholarly research and the diligent efforts of Armenian and foreign historians and genocide scholars, numerous unpublished memoirs, photographs, recorded testimonies, and archival documents related to the genocide remain scattered across various archives and repositories, still unknown to scholarship and awaiting thorough study and publication. One such overlooked source is the memoir *From Adapazar to Der Zor*, written by the educational and cultural activist, printing press owner, writer, translator, editor, and publisher Haroutioun K. Atanassian. Although the original manuscript remains missing, a copy of the memoir was discovered in the Kevork Mesrob Collection of the National Archives of Armenia (Collection No. 1388).¹

Atanassian's account constitutes one of the earliest memoirs on the Armenian Genocide. He recorded his experiences while the memories were still fresh, starting from 1 January 1919, immediately after returning from exile, completing the manuscript in Constantinople. The memoir provides a detailed description of the harrowing journey of deportation, the conditions in the concentration camps of the Syrian desert, the unbearable daily existence of the deportees, and the tortures they endured. At the same time, Atanassian documents episodes and observations absent from many other contemporary sources, thereby shedding additional light on events that unfolded during the genocide. Through the lens of his own experiences, he vividly conveys the tragedy endured by the Western Armenians and enriches our understanding of the lived realities of genocide survivors.

Haroutioun K. Atanassian was born in the town of Adapazar, located in the autonomous province of Nicomedia, on 15 April 1884.² He graduated from the local Aramian community high school in 1899, during the directorship of the prominent educator Hagop Bazbazian. Through self-study, he later acquired considerable expertise in mathematics and also completed a specialized course in the subject.³ At the age of sixteen, Atanassian worked as a carpenter for approximately three months. This practical skill later

1 National Archives of Armenia (NAA), fond 1388, list 1, file 74 and 82, comprising 54 and 97 pages respectively.

2 Haroutioun K. Atanassian, *Գաղղղթախայ տարեկաթր* [Armenian Colony Almanac] (Bucharest, 2nd year, 1940), 141.

3 Ibid. See also *Պատմագրր Անաքազար «Աստուածադնայ» քաղաքին* [History of the God-Given Town of Adapazar], ed. Ardashes Biberian and Vartan Yeghisheian (Paris, 1960), 692-693.

proved valuable during his exile, when he was accepted as a carpenter at the boatyard in Beredjig.

Immediately after graduating from the Aramian School, he began teaching mathematics and science in local Armenian schools.⁴ Atanassian also actively participated in the communal life of Adapazar and was known for his readiness to assist local initiatives. On 1 September 1911, the Adroushan Printing Union was founded in Adapazar, with Haroutioun Atanassian among its ten founding members. The Union aimed to establish a printing press and publish a newspaper titled *Putania* [Bithynia].⁵ After the Union dissolved, Atanassian purchased the printing house and continued its publishing activities independently.

In 1915, Atanassian was arrested in Adapazar and deported to the Syrian desert, surviving the ordeal. During the armistice period, he served for several months as director of the Armenian orphanage in Nishan Tash (Constantinople). He subsequently became director of the Central Office for Orphans. Thereafter, he returned to his native Adapazar, where he founded a special school.

Following the occupation of Adapazar by the Greek army, Atanassian became director of the Aramian Community Central School. However, with the Greek retreat and the advance of the Kemalist forces, he fled to Greece⁶ residing in the city of Efseinoupoli by July 1921.⁷

Atanassian did not remain in Greece for long and was already in Romania by 16 January 1922.⁸ He spent the remainder of his life there, residing in Bucharest, Constanța, and Froumoasa until his second arrest and exile. As in Adapazar, Constantinople, and Greece, he remained an active and devoted community figure, undertaking numerous communal responsibilities. Alongside his work as a teacher, Atanassian established a printing house, publishing house, and bookstore; authored and translated books; edited newspapers and periodicals; delivered lectures; and engaged in various cultural and educational activities. He published more than twenty-five books and booklets on subjects including mathematics, linguistics, health, literature, memoirs, and children's literature, while also editing and publishing nine newspapers and periodicals.

His life in Romania continued uninterrupted until 1944, when Soviet forces occupied

4 «Կեդր. Վարժարանի հայոց, Աստաբազար» [Armenian Central School, Adapazar], *Jamanak* (Constantinople), 6th year, No. 1542, 9/22 August 1913, 4; *Armenian Colony Almanac*, 141; *History of the God-Given Town*, 206, 692-693.

5 Teotig, *Տիպ ու տպ* [Printing and Lettering] (Constantinople, 1912), 145; Arshag Alboyadjian, «Հայերը եւ տպագրութիւնը» [The Armenians and Printing], pt. 1, *Hairenik Monthly* (Boston) 10, no. 9 (117) (July 1932): 88.

6 Նիկոլէր Հ. Յ. Դաշնակցութեան պատմութեան համար [Materials for the History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation], ed. Yervant Pamboukian, vol. 12 (Beirut, 2016), 398; *Armenian Colony Almanac*, 141; *History of the "God-Given" town of Adapazar*, 692-693.

7 «Իգմիթի շրջանէն Էքսինօքօլիս գտնուող գաղթականներուն ցանկը» [The List of Refugees from the Izmit Region in Exinopolis], *Djagatamart* (Constantinople), new period, 11th year, no. 812 (2633) (20 July 1921): 4.

8 *Armenian Colony Almanac*, 141, and «Հարցացուցակ Հ. Յ. Դաշնակցութեան» [Armenian Revolutionary Federation Questionnaire], see ARF Archives, Watertown, Mass., Section 5, File 1221, document 5.

Romania and Bulgaria. Like many Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) members and sympathizers, Atanassian was arrested and deported to the Soviet Union. He belonged to the first group of Armenian intellectuals arrested in Romania on 28 December 1944, unofficially known as “Sirouni’s group,” after the prominent intellectual Hagop Sirouni (Hagop Djololian), with whom Atanassian shared exile and imprisonment.⁹

Following his arrest, Atanassian was transferred to Moscow, interrogated in the Lubyanka prison by the Soviet security services, and subsequently exiled to Siberia.¹⁰ The details of his death remain unknown, but it is certain that after his arrest in Bucharest and deportation to Siberia, he never returned.

FROM ADAPAZAR TO DER ZOR

The “Preface” of Haroutioun Atanassian’s memoir is dated 1 January 1919, and it appears that he completed the manuscript within a relatively short period, either before or during 1921, as the transcript used in this study was copied in that year. He wrote the memoir in Constantinople, where he resided during the early armistice period before returning to his native Adapazar.

Years before his deportation, Atanassian had already published several books in Constantinople and Adapazar and was therefore fully aware of the importance of the written word. He had carried a notebook during the deportation in which he recorded events on a daily basis. However, while in the Syrian desert, on the banks of the Euphrates, he was robbed: “...not only they took my money and clothes, but also my papers and notebooks... thus I lost the notebook containing my writings, in which I had made detailed notes, every day, of all the things that happened to me during my deportation until that day.”¹¹

In the Preface, Atanassian further explained his purpose: “I wanted to create a brief history of what I saw and tried, in this story, to present incidents accurately. I didn’t want to embellish them with superfluous prose.”¹²

Indeed, he remained faithful to this self-imposed principle throughout the memoir. The events are described in a restrained and factual manner, largely devoid of emotional language, condemnation, or rhetorical exaggeration. Even the death of his only son, Adroushan, during the deportation is recounted with striking brevity: “...[In Katma] the number of deaths gradually reached enormous proportions and large cemeteries were

9 Hagop Sirouni, *Ինքնակենսագրական նոթեր* [Autobiographical Notes], prepared for publication by Henrik Bakhchinyan (Yerevan: Sarkis Khachents and the Y. Charents Museum of Literature and Arts, 2006), 271-275.

10 Edvard Jeamgocian, *Un martir între martiri. Haroutiun C. Atanassian-Adrușan: Amintiri din Viața de Exil*, supliment *Ararat*, București, nr. 6, Junie 2021, 17.

11 Haroutioun K. Atanassian, *Անսքայտիկ Տէր Զոր* [From Adapazar to Der Zor], editor, author of the preface and references Mihran A. Minassian (Yerevan: AGMI, 2025), 346.

12 Ibid., 109.

created in various places around the tents. It was there that I laid my only son, Adroushan, to rest in the ground. He was one year old.”¹³ Nothing further is added.

When describing the death of his mother, Atanassian wrote: “It was at this point that my mother died. I presented myself to the German captain, asking for a day’s grace, so that I could have her buried with the appropriate religious ceremony and leave the following day...”¹⁴ Once again, the language is devoid of overt emotion or expressions of grief. The same restrained tone characterizes his descriptions of the deaths of other family members and loved ones. Atanassian repeatedly notes that the horrors witnessed during the deportations had become so commonplace that deportees confronted death with a kind of numbness and emotional detachment. He himself was no exception, and this sense of emotional exhaustion appears to have remained with him even after his return from exile, when he composed his memoir.

Although Atanassian was deported from Adapazar together with his family, he refers to them only briefly, usually limiting himself to recording their deaths. By contrast, his descriptions of the Syrian desert camps are exceptionally detailed. Unlike many memoirists who were children or adolescents in 1915, Atanassian was already over thirty years old, enabling him to observe events with particular attentiveness. Moreover, while in camps such as Meskene and elsewhere, he worked as a peddler and frequently moved between tents, becoming a direct witness to the daily realities of camp life and death. As he recalled: “I came to tents, many times, in which there were no signs of life. I would lift the entrance flap and see entire dead families...”¹⁵ Such observations recur throughout the memoir.

Atanassian also worked as a cart driver in the desert, transporting deportees from one camp to another. This role exposed him directly to the countless unburied bodies scattered along the roads: “With my role as a coachman I travelled from Meskene to Rakka many times. During these journeys I always saw many unburied corpses, all of them completely naked. Many of them died from sicknesses and hunger; some had been killed by gendarmes and others by Arabs, after being robbed.”¹⁶

Atanassian passed through or stayed in many of the concentration camps where Armenians were held and provided detailed information about them, including Karaman, Eregli, Tarsus, Bab, Meskene, Dipsi, Abu Harera, Ayid, Hamam, Rakka, Ziaret, Sabka, Der Zor, Marat, Suvar, Mergede, Sheddadiye, Aleppo, and Beredjig. Some of the information Atanassian provides is unique, particularly his descriptions of places such as Ayid and Akterin, about which only a limited number of testimonies survive.

If the Armenian Genocide may broadly be understood as unfolding in three stages – first, the persecution and massacres in the deportees’ places of residence and surrounding regions; second, the deportation routes leading toward Aleppo and the Syrian deserts; and

¹³ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴ Ibid., 206.

¹⁵ Ibid., 220.

¹⁶ Ibid., 241.

third, the massacres and destruction carried out within the desert camps themselves – then Atanassian’s memoir is especially valuable for its detailed depiction of the latter two stages.

Atanassian began his memoir on 18 July 1915, the day Ibrahim Khairi, the former director of the Constantinople prisons, arrived in Adapazar with the mission of collecting weapons from the local Armenian population. On the following day, approximately eighty prominent members of the Armenian community, including Atanassian, were ordered to gather in the St. Garabed Church. There, they were subjected to severe beatings. Atanassian recalled:

The beating started. I was beaten by 12 men, led by Ibrahim Bey, without mercy. My feet were put into a *falakha*. Blows rained down from every direction. I couldn’t even feel which part of me was being struck. It took three months for the marks of the staves used to beat me to disappear. All of my fellow notables were beaten in the same way.¹⁷

After fifteen days of imprisonment, Atanassian was released on 2 August 1915. The first caravan of Armenian deportees left Adapazar the following day, soon followed by others. Atanassian himself departed shortly thereafter. By the time he left, only around ten percent of the town’s Armenian population remained. He was deported together with his mother, wife, newborn son, his brother’s wife and her two-year-old child, and possibly the child’s nanny.

After leaving Adapazar, the deportees stayed briefly in Bilecik, Eskişehir, and Afyonkarahisar before reaching Konya, where they remained for several days. They were then transferred to Karaman, where they stayed for a longer period. Atanassian recalls that the armed guards prohibited the deportees from drinking water or even attending to their most basic bodily needs.

Their next halt was Eregli, where they remained for some time. It was there that he encountered his brother, who was serving as a soldier. Atanassian managed to secure a one-day leave from the commander so that his brother could see his wife and mother. However, his brother did not return to the military encampment afterward; instead, he remained with the family and was deported alongside them. Haroutioun later wrote of his brother and the other soldiers: “These soldiers were, a few at a time, taken away on foot and put to the sword...”¹⁸ This account helps explain his decision to facilitate his brother’s escape.

The departure from the city of Eregli was accompanied by relentless beatings, which by then had become routine. As Atanassian remarked, the deportees had grown so accustomed to violence that “disrespect and expletives were nothing, with people accepting them as compliments.”¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid., 120.

¹⁸Ibid., 173.

¹⁹Ibid., 159.

From Eregli, the Atanassian family traveled through Pozanti to Tarsus, where Atanassian managed to delay their deportation for over twenty days by repeatedly relocating the family's tent alongside those of newly arrived deportees. They were later sent to Osmaniye, where a bribed official promised them protection but ultimately failed to prevent their onward deportation. Atanassian describes the condition of the deportees in Osmaniye in particularly stark terms:

Those days were dreadful for me. I thought that humanity hadn't seen—and couldn't possibly see—such an appalling level of wretchedness. I couldn't imagine such a level of inhumanity and barbarity. It seemed that man had no value whatsoever. The Armenians are being treated precisely as shepherds would treat wolves attacking their flock.²⁰

From Osmaniye, the deportees continued by cart through Kanli Gechid and Hassan Beyli to Islahiye, where thousands of deported Armenians had been concentrated. According to Atanassian, more than 5,000 families were gathered there, while epidemics claimed dozens of lives daily. Their caravan alone consisted of approximately 300 carts, over a thousand draft animals, and numerous deportees traveling on foot, including four archpriests exiled from Sis who were transporting cultural treasures of the Mother Cathedral to Aleppo.

After an arduous journey, the deportees reached Katma, one of the largest Armenian concentration camps, where, according to Atanassian, nearly 15,000 tents had been erected. It was there that Atanassian lost his one-year-old son.²¹

Disease spread rapidly throughout the camp, and mortality reached catastrophic proportions, with “various places around the tents becoming large cemeteries.”²² Atanassian also noted that those wishing to remain temporarily in Katma had to bribe Ahmed Eyup Bey, the inspector of the Dispatch Administration in Aleppo. According to his testimony, among the more than one hundred thousand families who passed through the camp, very few avoided paying him some form of bribe.

He further described in detail how deportees were forced onward from the camp. Mounted gendarmes, led by a German captain, burned the tents and belongings of those unable to depart quickly enough.²³

From Azaz, the Atanassian family continued on foot to Akterin after a grueling three-day journey. Conditions there were equally catastrophic:

Sickness was so prevalent, the number of sick people was so large, that the area had become like an actual hospital. The number of deaths was

²⁰Ibid., 183.

²¹Ibid., 196.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 205.

enormous. The burial group, composed of more than 20 individuals, couldn't cope with burying people individually and were forced to dig mass graves, large enough to bury 20-30 bodies at a time, which they then covered with soil.²⁴

Entire families perished in Akterin, where, according to Atanassian, five or six corpses were often removed from a single tent. He estimated that more than 20,000 Armenians were buried there, while over 1,000 children were left orphaned.

After leaving Akterin, the deportees walked for eight hours in heavy rain before reaching Bab. Describing the camp in bleak terms, Atanassian noted that scarcely a tent was without a sick person and that the majority of deportees suffered from severe hunger. He concluded his account of Bab with the following observation: "The officials' barbarity visited on those there, the hunger, sickness, rain and cold, united, reaping unbelievable numbers of lives. One of the largest Armenian cemeteries was created in Bab."²⁵

The Atanassians remained there only briefly before being deported onward to Meskene. According to him, up to 15,000 families had previously been concentrated there, while daily deaths ranged from 250 to 300. More than sixty gravediggers were reportedly unable to keep pace with the burials. Reflecting on the scale of famine and suffering, Atanassian remarked that "poets, instead of describing hell, [should] present Meskene as such."²⁶ In his estimation, approximately 75,000 Armenians died in Meskene, making it one of the largest Armenian cemeteries of the genocide period.

During their stay in Meskene, Atanassian, his wife, and his sister-in-law all contracted typhus. Nevertheless, all three survived and continued what he metaphorically described as their journey to Golgotha.

After Meskene, the deportees were transferred to Dipsi. Although only four hours away, the journey took two days because sickness and starvation left many unable to walk. Atanassian recalled abandoned children along the roadside and "the stench of dead bodies that remained unburied" throughout the route.²⁷

Through bribery, Atanassian secured permission to remain in Dipsi for fifteen days, but after the responsible official was transferred, the family was again ordered onward. When Atanassian resisted because his brother was dying of typhus, gendarmes dismantled the family tent, beat him severely, and forced them onto the road. Shortly after leaving Dipsi, his brother died in the desert; later, near Abu Harera, his two-year-old nephew also perished.

After brief stays in Abu Harera and Ayid—the only place where they experienced relative calm—the family was transferred to Hamam, where more than 2,000 Armenian deportee tents had been erected, before being deported onward to Rakka.

²⁴Ibid., 210.

²⁵Ibid., 215.

²⁶Ibid., 216.

²⁷Ibid., 226.

According to Atanassian, Armenian deportees in Rakka were spared large-scale massacres largely due to the protection extended by local Arab inhabitants. Between 6,000 and 7,000 Armenian tents surrounded the town, while a smaller number of deportees had managed to settle within Rakka itself and establish relatively more stable conditions of life. Reflecting on this stark contrast, Atanassian wrote: "Here, in the town of Rakka, it was like heaven, while the encampment of tents looked like hell to us."²⁸ He further noted that the town had "taken on an Armenian atmosphere," as Armenian deportees outnumbered the local Arab and Circassian populations.

Yet beyond the relative safety of the town, conditions in the surrounding camps remained catastrophic. Atanassian recorded scenes of extreme famine, destitution, and even cannibalism-descriptions so horrifying that, as he himself suggested, they defied full recounting.

As in his descriptions of other deportation sites, Atanassian noted that one of the large Armenian cemeteries was located on the right bank of the Euphrates near Rakka.²⁹ Leaving the town with what he described as painful memories, the Atanassians continued to the nearby settlement of Ziaret, where another encampment of Armenian deportees had been established. There, they encountered countless half-dead deportees and unburied corpses, resulting, in Atanassian's words, in "another large Armenian cemetery."³⁰

The Atanassians subsequently reached Sabka, where approximately 9,000 Armenian deportees were concentrated according to an official census cited by Atanassian. It was there that the governor of Der Zor, Salih Zeki Bey, ordered the deportees transferred onward to Der Zor. During the eight-day journey, the deportees passed unburied corpses and scattered human bones-evidence, as Atanassian observed, of earlier caravans destroyed by massacre, starvation, thirst, and exhaustion. From Der Zor, the Atanassians were deported to Marat.

Atanassian estimated that more than 80,000 Armenians had already passed along this route, while another 100,000 would later be driven toward Baghdad and Mosul, of whom fewer than 10,000 survived. After fifteen days in Marat, a caravan of approximately 20,000 deportees was transferred to Suvar. From there, around 12,000 were sent to Sheddadiye, while about 300 families-including the Atanassians, remained behind through bribery.

Five days later, two severely wounded Armenian survivors arrived in Suvar and recounted the fate of the deportees sent onward: the men had been killed first, followed by the women, leaving the "Markadeh deserts filled with Armenian corpses."³¹ A second caravan of approximately 5,000 Armenians departing from Suvar was massacred shortly afterward.

The remaining Armenians, fully aware of the fate awaiting them, turned increasingly to collective prayer and religious rituals, while news continued to arrive of further massacres,

²⁸ Ibid., 258.

²⁹ Ibid., 265.

³⁰ Ibid., 266.

³¹ Ibid., 315.

including the destruction of additional deportation caravans. Of the approximately 23,000 Armenians once concentrated in the Der Zor region, only about 300 families remained alive, among them the Atanassians. Despite paying substantial bribes, these survivors were eventually expelled and forced onward. As Atanassian wrote, they moved “like condemned people walking to the scaffold, expecting death at every moment.”³²

Along the route, the deportees encountered countless mutilated corpses scattered across the valleys. After four days of marching through what Atanassian described as landscapes filled with “thousands of naked dead bodies,” the group reached Margadeh, where despair became overwhelming. During the night of 25 September/8 October 1916, several Armenian men escaped through the Chechen guards’ cordon. Encouraged by his wife and sister-in-law, Atanassian fled with his friend toward Rakka. Of the approximately 125 men who escaped, he estimated that only twenty-five ultimately survived.

After wandering for four days without water, Atanassian finally reached the Euphrates, where he was attacked, wounded, and robbed by two Arabs who took his money, clothing, documents, and notebooks. After partially recovering and receiving brief assistance from several Bedouin Arabs, who provided him with cloth to cover himself, Atanassian resumed his journey and, after seven days crossing the desert, reached Rakka for the second time. There he survived through various jobs, including work on a bathhouse construction project commissioned by local authorities.

When famine halted the project, Atanassian continued to Meskene and then Aleppo, where he worked on the construction of a factory near Muslimiye. During this period, he regularly stayed at the Armenian Apostolic church in Aleppo. Following a police raid on the church, he was arrested with other Armenian exiles but avoided deportation to Der Zor by joining the Ottoman army as a skilled laborer. He was subsequently sent to the boatyard at Biredjig, directed by Djemil Köhne Bahri, where many Armenians survived through wartime labor instead of being deported further into the desert. Later, owing to his knowledge of French, Atanassian was transferred from manual labor to clerical work in the German administration attached to the boatyard.

By February 1918, Atanassian had returned to Aleppo, where traces of his life become fragmentary until his reappearance in Constantinople during the armistice period. Of the seven members of the Atanassian family deported from Adapazar, only Haroutioun Atanassian survived the Syrian desert and ultimately reached Constantinople.

From Adapazar to Der Zor stands as a significant firsthand testimony that deepens our understanding of the Armenian Genocide, not only as a historical event but as a lived experience of systematic destruction and survival. Its evidentiary value lies both in the precision of its observations and in the sobriety of its narration, making it an important source for reconstructing the experiences of deportees and further enriching the documentary foundations of Armenian Genocide historiography.

³² Ibid., 319.

BOOK REVIEW

Guleeg Haroian, née Toomasian, *At Four O'Clock in the Afternoon*, translated by Rose D. Guerin, edited by Gil Harootunian, and Eva Hightaian, née Haroian, *Bones and Bodies, We Had to Walk Over Them*, edited by Gil Harootunian (Fresno, CA: Tadem Press, 2023), 231 pp.

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The volume under review is the second in a series published by the editor under the Tadem Press imprint. The first, *Memoirs of a Soldier About the Days of Tragedy* (2022), presented the recollections of Bedros Haroian, chronicling his life before and after the Armenian Genocide.

In the present volume, editor Gil Harootunian presents the stories of her grandmother, Guleeg Haroian, and Guleeg's daughter, Eva (Haroian) Hightaian, Harootunian's aunt. Based on oral interviews conducted with both women in 1976, the volume brings together rare first-hand testimonies of Armenian women who survived both the Hamidian massacres of 1895-1896 and the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

The dual narratives foreground the central role of women during the genocide, highlighting both their victimization and their agency in making life-saving decisions under extreme circumstances. These are stories of women who endured profound suffering, witnessed the destruction of their families and communities, and nevertheless survived, rebuilt, and preserved their memories.

The first memoir, *At Four O'Clock in the Afternoon*, introduces the reader to the recollections of Guleeg Haroian, who was ten years old when the massacres of 1895 reached her home village of Tadem. Her testimony is particularly significant, as it appears to be one of the few English-language oral histories by a survivor who experienced both the Hamidian massacres and the Armenian Genocide.

Haroian begins with a brief account of the events of October 1895, during which her father and uncle, the local Armenian priest, were killed by Turks, the family home was destroyed, and the surviving family members were left destitute. Seven years later, she married Hagop Haroian and had four children. Told in a restrained and matter-of-fact style, her narrative conveys the devastating normalisation of violence experienced by survivors.

The memoir then shifts to 1915, immersing the reader in the unfolding genocide in Tadem. Haroian recounts looting, killings, and the destruction of her community, noting the involvement of Turkish neighbours in the violence against local Armenians. Her testimony offers a microhistorical perspective on the broader genocidal process while also highlighting her determination in searching for her family and eventually emigrating to the United States.

The second memoir, *Bones and Bodies, We Had to Walk Over Them*, presents the oral history of Eva Hightaian (née Haroian), Guleeg's daughter. It focuses on her experiences of deportation, forcible transfer into an Arab Muslim household, and eventual reunion with her mother. Through the eyes of a nine-year-old child, the memoir offers a vivid depiction of life in Tadem on the eve of WWI and the subsequent destruction of Armenian communal life. Eva recounts how Armenian men were taken first, followed by women and children, before she was eventually absorbed into another household.

As Harootunian notes, Eva's testimony is particularly significant because it illuminates the decision-making processes of a child confronted with deportation, death marches, and forced transfer. Her years with an Arab family culminate in a difficult emotional decision when her biological mother locates her: whether to remain with the adoptive family she had come to know or to reunite with her mother. Her decision to leave ultimately led to emigration to the United States and reunion with her father.

The principal value of these testimonies lies in their recovery of Armenian women's voices, which have often remained marginal in conventional narratives of the genocide. The memoirs document not only the violence inflicted upon women, including physical, emotional, and structural forms of trauma, but also their resilience and capacity for agency under conditions of extreme coercion.

These themes are further contextualized in the volume's scholarly framing. In her introduction, Harootunian emphasizes the experiences of child survivors and reflects on the persistence of trauma across generations. The interviews reveal varied responses to traumatic memory: some survivors attempted to suppress or distance themselves from the past, while others remained deeply marked by recurring recollections.

Rebecca Jinks's afterword, "Genocidal Captivity and Absorption in Comparative Context," provides an important analytical framework for interpreting the memoirs. Jinks examines the concept of "genocidal absorption," referring to the removal of women and children from their original ethnic, religious, or national communities as part of a broader process of group destruction. In this regard, the oral histories presented in the volume make a particularly valuable contribution, as official documentation rarely preserves women's voices or subjective experiences with comparable immediacy.

Jinks's comparative approach further strengthens the volume by situating the Armenian case alongside other instances of forced assimilation and child transfer, including those involving Indigenous populations in settler-colonial contexts and the Yazidis. This broader analytical perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of the Armenian experience within wider patterns of gendered genocidal violence.

Overall, *At Four O'Clock in the Afternoon* and *Bones and Bodies, We Had to Walk Over Them* constitute important contributions to Armenian Genocide scholarship. By centering women's and children's voices, the volume enriches our understanding of the gendered dimensions of genocidal violence and offers valuable first-hand testimony that complements archival and official sources.

VISUALIZING MEMORY AND LOSS: FRENCH-ARMENIAN DOCUMENTARY RESPONSES TO THE GENOCIDE

Film Review

Armenians, The Hidden Grandmothers, dir. Alexandra Routhiau Mikaélian. France, 2024. 52 min; *Ojakh: On the Other Side of the Silence*, dir. Diana Mkrtchyan. France/Armenia, 2024. 95 min.; *Alone*, dir. Hakob Melkonyan and Gaëlle Hamalian-Testud. France/Armenia, 2024. 94 min.

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How should the legacy of genocide be represented in film? How can filmmakers convey the gravity of historical trauma while working with limited production resources? Three notable French-Armenian documentary films addressing the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide were featured at the 2025 Golden Apricot International Film Festival. More than a century after the events, each offers a distinct cinematic approach to engaging with the enduring legacy of the Armenian Genocide.

In *Armenians, The Hidden Grandmothers*, Alexandra Routhiau Mikaélian explores a personal family history shaped by the genocide. Her Armenian grandmother, before emigrating to France in the post-genocide years, left behind her first child in a Turkish family, creating two family branches that remained unaware of one another for generations. The documentary follows the rediscovery of these long-lost relatives in contemporary Turkey.

The film seeks to confront inherited silence and foster dialogue and reconciliation. That such silences persist 110 years after the genocide—despite a substantial body of memoirs, scholarship, and artistic representations—is itself revealing. At times, these silences rupture unexpectedly. One particularly striking moment occurs when a Turkish man (oddly looking like Serj Tankian), confronted with the family revelations, asks: “Are we Armenians, then?”

This intimate approach possesses both strengths and limitations. On the one hand, the documentary conveys genuine human warmth and illustrates the possibility of interpersonal openness and recognition among some Turks. On the other hand, its intensely personal lens risks reducing the scale and structural nature of genocide to a matter of individual family trauma and private misfortunes.

Although Mikaélian gestures toward broader historical realities, notably the absence of Armenians from formerly Armenian quarters, the narrative remains centered on family connections and the experiences of Armenian girls who were absorbed into Turkish households and later become “silent grandmothers.” This thematic focus is reinforced by

the inclusion of Fethiye Çetin, whose influential memoir *Anneannem* (My Grandmother, 2004) contributed to bringing the issue of hidden Armenian ancestry into Turkish public discourse.

The result is a warm and humane exploration of the genocide's afterlives. Families are reunited, difficult conversations begin, and some measure of reconciliation becomes imaginable. Yet more challenging political and historical questions remain largely outside the frame. By localizing catastrophe within the microcosm of family history, the film renders an otherwise overwhelming historical trauma manageable. In this sense, it stands apart within the genre of genocide documentaries: something tangible is indeed achieved—the families are reunited, individuals find one another.

A more ambitious and philosophically layered work, *Ojakh: On the Other Side of the Silence*, was screened on the opening day of the festival. Directed by Diana Mkrtchyan, the film emerged from a decade-long project involving multiple rounds of interviews conducted in Armenian border communities. Distinguished by psychological depth, philosophical reflection, and striking visual poetics, the documentary stands apart from more conventional historical documentaries.

At the center of the film is Erhan Arik, a Turkish photographer born in 1984 in Ardahan, northeastern Turkey, in a house that had belonged to Armenians before 1915. Interestingly, his journey was catalyzed by a dream in which a male voice asked why he had turned the room where his wife once baked bread and his children played into a barn. Disturbed by the experience, Arik embarked on a search to understand the meaning of this haunting voice.

Arik's search led him to Armenia, where he photographed descendants of genocide survivors and recorded their testimonies. During an exhibition of his photographs and stories in France, he encountered Diana Mkrtchyan, who initiated the collaboration that ultimately resulted in this documentary. The project spanned nearly ten years, with the earliest layers of the film consisting of material from Arik's initial trip. Remarkably, he was able to interview a 105-year-old survivor from Kars, one of the last remaining witnesses. The film follows Arik's travels through Armenian border villages and Gyumri, where he encounters descendants of Armenians forcibly displaced from Kars, Nakhichevan, and other lost homelands, some now located just across the border (e.g., Bagaran).

What most distinguishes the documentary is Arik's reflective voice. His meditations on historical destruction, absence, memory, and inherited responsibility introduce a philosophical dimension rarely sustained in genocide documentaries. Whereas many such works rely primarily on factual testimony and historical reconstruction, *Ojakh* creates space for introspection and existential engagement. Arik's voice is marked by philosophical insight and poetic sensitivity, elevating the work as a whole. Ultimately, his journey culminates not merely in discovering Armenian voices, but in internalizing them. The haunting voice he seeks becomes part of his own moral consciousness. Thus, Arik does indeed find the Armenian voice—within himself, as he ultimately becomes that voice.

Diana Mkrtchyan successfully weaves together interviews, landscapes, memory, and reflection into a coherent cinematic whole. The film affirms that even in 110 years, the

relevance and significance of the genocide have not diminished. The film's emotional power is reinforced by survivor testimony. As one descendant in Gyumri declares: "The genocide will not be forgotten in 100 or 500 years; it is our fate, our burden. Wounds heal, not the pain."

Ojakh has already received international recognition, including the Best Documentary Feature award at the International Women's Film Festival in New York (2024). Nevertheless, it was given surprisingly limited prominence in the Yerevan festival's program.

The third French-Armenian documentary, *Alone*, takes a markedly different approach. It follows a photographer who travels from France to Armenia in search of her Armenian roots, beginning with sites where her grandfather may have lived as an orphan in the aftermath of the genocide. Her journey leads her to Gyumri, where she encounters a children's home housed in a building that once sheltered Armenian orphans.

Unexpectedly, however, the historical quest gradually recedes as the film shifts its focus toward the daily lives of contemporary boys residing in the orphanage. This narrative transition remains largely unexplained, resulting in a documentary whose structure appears diffuse and uncertain. In the absence of a clear storyline, the film loosely documents the everyday events of the children's lives.

However, the film avoids drifting into monotony thanks to the compelling presence of one particular child, Artur, whose natural charisma and expressive face captivate the viewer. Remarkably mature for his age, he lends the film much of its emotional weight. His maturity, expressive presence, and emotional authenticity provide the documentary with its affective force and narrative coherence.

Rather than directly addressing the genocide, the film unfolds within the context of contemporary Armenian crises, most notably the recent ethnic cleansing of Artsakh, which hovers somewhere in the background. The genocide of 1915 is left unspoken, yet its shadow persists indirectly through shades of absence, displacement, and inherited fragmentation.

At first glance, the film may appear narratively elusive or emotionally attenuated. Upon reflection, however, this apparent emptiness proves meaningful. What *Alone* ultimately captures is the post-genocidal condition of historical absence and the force of oblivion: the loss of stories, voices, and records beyond recovery. The protagonist's inability to reconstruct her grandfather's past mirrors the viewer's own encounter with this historical void. Whether intentional or not, the film conveys the epistemic and existential impasse inherent in engaging an inaccessible past. What befell the grandfather before or during his time in the orphanage cannot be retrieved—there is no one left to tell the story, no records to consult, nothing to reconstruct. The viewer, like the protagonist, is thus positioned as a passive witness to absence, confined to the flow of the present, unable to grasp the missing past.

Taken together, these three French-Armenian documentaries demonstrate how temporal distance shapes cinematic engagement with genocide. Each approaches the Armenian Genocide not as immediate trauma, but as inherited memory, historical absence, or an unresolved post-genocidal afterlife.

Curiously, all three French-Armenian films were relegated to a minor venue and

screened only once at the Golden Apricot festival. For the first two films, even basic information was lacking in the official programme. From a foreign visitor's perspective, this marginalization of the films within Armenia itself appears both baffling and regrettable.

The festival also featured several documentaries and short films addressing the recent ethnic cleansing of Artsakh. In this case, it is precisely the lack of temporal distance that makes the task difficult. Most of the films focused on personal stories of displacement and loss. While emotionally compelling, they offered little contextualization of Artsakh's historical, cultural, religious, and symbolic significance. When such a profound collective and historical catastrophe is reduced to individualized narratives of suffering, it can easily give outsiders the impression that the catastrophe is little more than a private disaster – akin to any event that forces individuals to flee their homes. It remains the task of future films to convey the historical, cultural, and religious distinctiveness of Artsakh, its deeper significance, its now-lost unique atmosphere, not to mention its symbolic value for Armenian identity as a rare case of national victory.

Yet such silence is understandable, even inevitable. The trauma of Artsakh remains immediate and unresolved: communities continue to endure shock, grief, and displacement, while a broader collective state of shock appears to prevail in Armenia, manifesting in varied responses. Considerable time will be required before the full significance of this loss can be absorbed, let alone artistically articulated. In this sense, the limited perspective is hardly surprising. Moreover, the accumulation of national tragedies overburdens the psychological and cultural capacity to process them.

Yet there was one notable exception – Christine Haroutounian's debut feature *After Dreaming* (2025), a visually sophisticated and emotionally resonant response to the tragedy of Artsakh and its place within the Armenian collective psyche. Structured as a road movie that gradually transforms into a dreamlike communal wedding feast, evocative of the famous mass wedding in Shushi, the film succeeds in captivating its audience, particularly those attuned to Armenian cultural memory. It culminates in a striking symbolic sequence in which celebratory fireworks morph into missiles and the church-filled horizon begins to rotate. The imagery is visually arresting and symbolically powerful, demonstrating a clear mastery of cinematic language and earning the film a place in the history of Armenian cinematography. The film was awarded the Stone Prize at the Golden Apricot Festival. One might even argue that Haroutounian's debut invites comparison with the early works of many established masters of world cinema. Stylistically, her work recalls that of Maria Saakyan (1980-2018).

Overall, the 2025 Golden Apricot International Film Festival demonstrated the continued relevance of genocide as a cinematic subject – not only in relation to Armenian tragedies, but also in films engaging with the devastation of Gaza, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and the aftermath of ISIS violence in Iraq. If anything, these films collectively suggest that the familiar slogan "Never again" has never sounded hollower than it does today.

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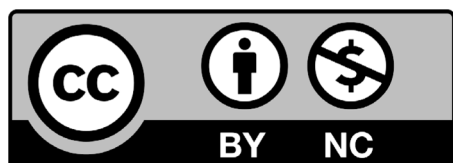
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