

Armenians in Lebanon: Becoming Local in the Levant

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Researchers who study Armenians in Lebanon are often tagged to four additional scholarly domains: minority, diaspora, refugee, and genocide studies.¹ While these fields are not in and of themselves a problem, the automatic association of Armenians with them is limiting. Many scholars assume Armenians lack power; belong to, or wish to be in, another national space, whether real or imagined; lack agency; and are in some form only understandable as victims of the Armenian Genocide.

In some ways, these associations are expected, and dare I say helpful. Numerically, Armenians are a minority in Lebanon, and given the political system of that nation-state, along with the sectarian composition of state power, they do not quantify as a majority.² Identifying them as a minority can force the researcher to consider dynamics and structures of power and to study how the state, majority power brokers, and Armenians together mitigate these forces.

Scholarship on Armenians in Lebanon also identifies Armenians as being part of a global diaspora. This, too, can help us understand their myriad identifications. It can also help steer the researcher away from looking at Lebanese power structures solely through the lens of numbers or vis-à-vis the state and its inhabitants. But the diaspora label assumes a transitional quality to Armenians and fails to consider them as local.³ Moreover, diaspora studies constructs Armenians as sharing, fundamentally, *one* experience, irrespective of specific history, location, and agency.⁴ I am not denying connections between Armenians in Lebanon and Armenians elsewhere, of course. But were we to focus on the connections of Lebanese Armenians to other Armenian communities worldwide, we would in fact narrow our understanding of them and marginalize them once more.

The Armenian Genocide encapsulates not only the destruction of the Ottoman Armenian millet, but also the subsequent forced deportations and the trauma that survivors transmitted to future generations. It also explains the dramatic increase of Armenians living in Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, as well as the changed fabric of modern Turkey and the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) after World War I. While the Genocide surely was an epistemological break for Ottoman Armenians and their descendants, it has also become the sole way to explore Armenian presence in the region. This is partly an understandable defensive reaction by scholars and activists alike due to continued genocide denial. But it has had an ironic consequence: the Armenian Genocide has cannibalized scholarship on Armenians, which has viewed Armenians as perpetual victims yearning for recognition of a past crime, rather than as an active, engaged local community.⁵

Studying Armenians through these rubrics fails to consider their different lived experiences in Lebanon and throughout the region as well as how individuals articulate their own belonging. And while Armenians may exhibit some (or even many) characteristics of a minority, diaspora, refugee population, or product of genocide, the self-referential nature of this scholarship leads to the minoritization of Armenians. The question, then,

is: how does one engage with Armenian presence in Lebanon without further marginalizing their experiences?

In the remainder of this roundtable essay, I use the experience of Armenians in Beirut in 1957–58 to look beyond minoritization—in other words, to demonstrate what a minority group’s deepening imbrication in everyday politics could look like. In their everyday lives, Armenians enacted their Lebanese citizenship, participated in Lebanese politics, and articulated their belonging in the country. They used their treatment as a minority, presumably limited to their own “enclaves,” to attack their enemies and reorder “their” Armenian space. This involvement challenges Armenian and Lebanese historiographies, forcing the researcher to reconsider both histories. I am not advocating that this results in a more correct history, for that would presume the existence of one “complete” history. But I do think we should more closely consider how marginalized actors used, and empowered themselves through, minoritization.

From the mid-1950s, Lebanese President Camille Chamoun’s (1952–58) openly pro-Western orientation created considerable political tensions in Lebanon. His divisive stance, together with increased social disparities in the wake of the Gulf oil boom and the influx of Palestinian refugees, created a toxic social, political, and economic environment. In this fraught situation, and in a desperate attempt to hold on to power, in 1957 he used the irregular and corrupt parliamentary elections, in which his party and its allies—including the rightist, nationalist Armenian Dashnak Party—triumphed, to push through an unpopular bid to extend his presidency by an additional term starting the following year. Political rivalries hardened, and by 1958 most of the country (with the exception of the Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorate) was under “rebel” control.⁶ Negotiations to end the fighting between government figures and the opposition were predicated upon the agreement to choose a mutually acceptable successor to Chamoun. Fouad Chihab, the head of the Lebanese army, emerged as the best choice, garnering support from all sides of the conflict. A national pact was signed on 17 October 1958.⁷

Armenian parties participated in, and contributed to, the events of 1957 and 1958. Simultaneously, they used their position within the Lebanese political system to jostle for power within the Armenian community. This development turned violent and concluded only in December 1958, almost two months *after* the Lebanese mini-civil war had ended, when the Lebanese army intervened. These tensions and violent confrontations between Armenian parties and their armed men had a crucial and unprecedented spatial effect: they territorialized parts of Beirut. To be sure, parts of Lebanon were already organized according to sect and class. By relative contrast, in 1957–58 many Armenians in Mar Mikael, Sin el Fil, Bourj Hammoud, and Corniche el-Nahr were re-sorted and relocated, often by force, according to political party affiliation.

Armenians were firmly part of, and ensconced in, Lebanese politics. Lebanese Armenians were divided along the right–left fault lines that divided Lebanese politics and society in general at that time. They were Lebanonized, one may say. Secondly, and at the same time, the Lebanese state was somehow Armenianized, in that it started to pay more attention than before to Armenian matters. By December 1958 it intervened directly and with military force in Armenian neighborhoods in order to end the interne-cine Armenian confrontation. Thirdly, while Armenians were Lebanonized, they were very strongly—by 1958 indeed mortally—internally divided along political lines.⁸

This was the case in part because the Cold War—left-wing versus right-wing politics and ideologies globally—was felt with particular acuity in the Armenian case, for the simple reason that the Soviet Union included the ASSR, that is, that Armenia formed part of one Cold War superpower.

While roughly segregated by class, by the 1950s Armenians of different political and religious persuasions lived in various neighborhoods of Beirut.⁹ Armenian Orthodox and Catholic churches were established within walking distance from one another in Bourj Hammoud and downtown. Armenian schools, administered by the headquarters of the Armenian Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant Churches, also enjoyed a diverse student body. The community centers of Armenian political parties were no different. Located near one another, they attracted children and adults from the neighborhood, and were often flexible regarding membership and affiliation. Thus, while youth from the neighborhood often joined a sports team affiliated with a political party, they or their parents were not necessarily party members; rather, they chose a team for its success and quality.¹⁰

This situation changed following the 1957 elections and 1958 civil violence. In 1957, according to Dashnak reports, members of the leftist Hnchak Party attacked polling stations by throwing rocks at and opening fire on voters.¹¹ That these attacks took place “at the entrance of Hajin” coded and compartmentalized a bit of Beirut’s urban space, separating it from the city as a whole. This move was sharpened by descriptions of how the victims and perpetrators experienced and moved about during the confrontations. There were attacks at the “entrance” of the neighborhood, and inhabitants “returned” to the neighborhood during the attacks to seek “refuge.” They were also “forced inside” due to violence. These descriptions demonstrated the struggle for power not only within but also between Beirut’s Armenian-populated neighborhoods (in effect treating them as separate from Beirut more broadly).

As part of Lebanon’s wider crisis in 1957–58, then, *specific* Armenian Beiruti neighborhoods began to stand for *particular* imaginations of belonging and articulating citizenship in Lebanon. This territorialization, as it were, of Armenian neighborhoods such as Mar Mikael, Bourj Hammoud, Sin el-Fil, and Rmeil was new. Prior to 1958, Beirut’s Armenian, Arabic, and Francophone press collectively described these areas as “the Armenian neighborhoods.” But by early 1958, the Armenian press talked of “the violent Bourj Hammoud,” “the suffering Corniche al-Nahr,” and a “Nor Hajin under siege.”

Armenian parties also used the editorial pages to lambast one another and accuse each other of murdering “true Armenian patriots.” For the Hnchaks, “the Dashnak Party held the Armenian people hostage,” and even “the Lebanese military cannot save them.”¹² The inability of Lebanese state institutions to do so was perhaps related to their lack of knowledge of the entry and exit points of their new demarcations. On the other hand, in the view of the Dashnak Party the Lebanese state was working on behalf of the party’s supporters. After the murder of Dashnak member and athlete Georg Oskerchyan in Hajin, *Aztag* reported that the Lebanese army arrived at the scene and transported him to the Hotel Dieu hospital.¹³ For the Dashnaks, the state’s intervention became a validation of their campaign against their Armenian rivals. Indeed, *Aztag* reported that the army was forced to surround the entire neighborhood of Hajin to “conduct arrests.”¹⁴ Armenian newspapers continued to reinforce the distinction between the “violent”

Armenian- and “restive” non-Armenian-populated neighborhoods on the one hand, and the “peace-loving” neighborhoods on the other.

At the same time, the intervention of the Lebanese army—and not of a Lebanese civil service such as the police or ambulatory services—indicated that the state feared the political nature and fallout of the intra-Armenian violence. The army had entered a district where its power, while respected, was somewhat foreign. It had sought permission to enter, and then was compelled to barricade the area in order to do so, treating the neighborhood as a hostile and autonomous space. The act of moving the body, too, shows how quarters had become territorialized.

The violence continued for two months after the national cessation of hostilities, ending by early December with additional negotiations and declarations amongst Armenian parties brokered by Minister of Interior Raymond Eddé.¹⁵ Eddé’s official declaration reinforced the authority of the Lebanese state by invoking the Armenian neighborhoods’ proximity to Beirut, which, it reminded readers, was “its” capital.¹⁶ Beirut was not to be further factionalized, or, even if factionalized, the different Armenian quarters still fell under the jurisdiction of the state. Still, new facts had been created; damage had been done. Eddé’s declaration also acknowledged the creation of bounded neighborhoods. His call for the immediate return of inhabitants to “their own neighborhoods” contradictorily acknowledged both the separation of Armenians vis-à-vis non-Armenians in Lebanon and an internal displacement.¹⁷

The 1957 elections became an opportunity for the Dashnak Party to continue its virulent attacks against its rivals. Its success in an albeit corrupt election process allowed both its supporters and its detractors to use urban space in Beirut to seize Lebanese territory. While these “enclaves” challenged the sovereignty of Lebanese state power, reliance on the Lebanese military to restore order simultaneously reaffirmed the power of the Lebanese state. And yet, the interventions of the state demonstrated its role in “Armenian” affairs, making these conflicts far more local than merely “Armenian.” The participation of the Lebanese state along with ideological demographic changes further oriented the Armenian inhabitants of Lebanon to Lebanon itself. The actions by Armenians and non-Armenians alike in 1957–58 showcase how Armenians lived as local Lebanese citizens, undercutting diasporic categorizations, their refugee past, and the presumption of a powerless and marginalized minority. The support and opposition to the Lebanese president and to the Dashnak Party became opportunities for Armenians to claim and struggle for power, all the while articulating belonging and citizenship.

NOTES

¹This observation applies to researchers who work on Armenians in the Middle East more generally, but I restrict my discussion to those focused on Armenians in Lebanon.

²For more on Armenian involvement in Lebanese politics, see Nikola B. Schahgaldian, “The Political Integration of an Immigrant Community into a Composite Society: The Armenians in Lebanon 1920–74” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1978). On Armenians’ involvement in Lebanese parliamentary elections specifically, see Zaven Messerlian, *Armenian Participation in the Lebanese Legislative Elections 1934–2009* (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2013). On the establishment of a Lebanese Armenian community in Lebanon and Syria, see Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008).

³An exception to this reading is the collection *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualising Community*. However, the contributors continue to maintain an overarching diasporic experience amongst communities that they simultaneously identify as living in “spaces that are, in practice, their homes.” Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian, eds., *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualising Community* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2015), 2–3.

⁴See, e.g., Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), in which Armenians are constructed as a category and then called a “victim diaspora.”

⁵In an effort to interconnect Armenians, scholarship on Armenians stresses the totality of the Armenian Genocide. In addition, the creation of this monolith collapses different phases of extermination into a single whole, stitching together different phases of the genocide and incidents of aggression against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. See, e.g., Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 71–118. This minimizes the experience of violence for the victims, homogenizes perpetrators, and discourages the individual examination of such events. For a notable exception to this homogenized reading, see Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014), 149–72.

⁶Fawwaz Traboulsi, *The History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 134.

⁷“‘National’ Salvation,” *Daily Star* (Beirut, Lebanon), 18 October 1958, 1; Traboulsi, *History*, 137.

⁸This division was not new, of course. It dated back to before World War II, and was manifested in the 1946–49 repatriation and the 1956 Catholicos election of the Cilician See. But it came to a boil in 1958 because of the general Lebanese context and the accentuating right–left political polarization that at this point in time mapped roughly, though by no means fully, on to the country’s Muslim-Christian confessional landscape. See Tsolin Nalbantian, *Beyond Diaspora: How Armenians Made Lebanon Their Own* (forthcoming).

⁹These ranged from the upper middle-class neighborhoods of Zarif and Zoqat al-Blat in Ras Beirut to the lower middle- and working-class areas around St. Sarkis Patriarchate near the Serail. Armenians also resided in Furn al-Shabak and Geitawi. Outside of the center, Armenians lived in the working- and lower-class neighborhoods of Qarantina, Mar Mikael, Corniche al-Nahr, Bourj Hammoud, and Sin el-Fil. Within Qarantina, some Armenians still lived within the confines of the original Armenian refugee camp. The original camp of Sanjak, too, continued to house Armenians of more meager means; Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 54.

¹⁰Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia*, 64–65.

¹¹“Moskua Mijamtets ‘ Libanani Ėntrut ‘iwnerun,” *Aztag* (Beirut, Lebanon), 16 June 1957, 1.

¹²“Vochimeru Shark’ ě G ě Sharunakui Haykakan T’ aghamaseren Ners,” *Zartonk* (Beirut, Lebanon), 19 November 1958, 1.

¹³“Anarg Vochragortsner G ě Spannen HMEMakan Marzik Shamin ew G ě Viraworen Grigor Seraytaryan ě,” *Aztag* (Beirut, Lebanon), 28 August 1958, 4.

¹⁴“Hay Hamaynavamer ě Nor Zoh m ě ews Khlets ‘in,” *Aztag* (Beirut, Lebanon), 29 August 1958, 2. Armenians use the name “Hajin” for this neighborhood. They first labeled it so in the 1920s, when arriving as refugees from Hajin in South Cilicia. Arab-Lebanese use the names “Corniche al-Nahr” or “Badawi.”

¹⁵“Eghbayraspan Ochimer Haykakan T’ agheren Ners,” 28 August 1958, 1; Kats’ ut’ un ě Peyrut’ i Haykakan T’ agheren Ners,” *Zartonk* (Beirut, Lebanon), 30 August 1958, 1; “Haykakan T’ agheru Mej Karg ě Verahastatelu Hamar,” *Aztag* (Beirut, Lebanon), 13 December 1958, 1; “Nerk’ in Nakhararhi Koch’ ě Libanahayut’ yan,” *Aztag* (Beirut, Lebanon), 12 December 1958, 1.

¹⁶*Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

¹⁷*Ibid.*