

RESEARCH: BRIDGING BOUNDARIES

Documenting 100 Years of Displacement Among Syrian-Armenians: An Interview with Anoush Baghdassarian Conducted by Lauren Broidy

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On February 7, 2018, Anoush Baghdassarian² (Claremont McKenna College '17) conducted a presentation of her undergraduate research on Syrian refugees in Armenia called “Coming ‘Home’: Documenting 100 years of Displacement of Syrian-Armenians.” *This interview was lightly edited for clarity.*

Lauren: Tell me about your background and what drew you to go to Armenia this summer.

Anoush: I’m Armenian. Both my parents are Armenian. My mother is from Uruguay and my father is from New York, but his parents are from Egypt and Greece, and my mother’s parents are from Uruguay and Argentina. So, my grandparents come from four different countries on three different continents, but all originating from Western Armenia, which is where the genocide occurred. Because of my family’s background, I have always grown up learning about the Armenian genocide. I used to wear a bracelet that says, “Remember the forgotten,” because I always learned of the Armenian genocide as a forgotten genocide and with that, I was introduced to the dangerous consequences of forgetting. The most pertinent example seemed to surround me every day; even though I

¹ Lauren Broidy, a current undergraduate at Claremont McKenna College ('19), conducted this interview on February 7, 2018 at the [Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum](#) at Claremont McKenna College.

² Anoush Baghdassarian is earning her M.A. in Human Rights Studies at Columbia University. She recently interned at the Office of the Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, and currently serves as an advisor to the Permanent Mission of Armenia to the United Nations.

grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and everybody knew about the Holocaust, which of course is very important, many in my community, including many friends, didn't know about the Armenian genocide. I would then remember the quote from Hitler as he was planning the extermination of the Polish Jews: "Who, after all, today remembers the annihilation of the Armenians?"³ From an early age, I took it into my own hands to help educate my community about the Armenian genocide. In seventh or eighth grade, I started giving presentations in my middle school to history classes. I always made sure not to present the issue as black and white. I avoided dichotomies such as "The Ottoman Turks were bad. The Armenians were good," and I made sure to supplement that with examples from my own family history of Turkish friends aiding my ancestors escape death. This was important to me because I feel that over-generalizations typically remove the nuance that realistically depict situations and I understood that since I was the first person from whom many of my peers were learning of this atrocity, I had a responsibility to portray it accurately. Additionally, I think these black and white descriptions fuel the denial of the genocide in Turkey, and I didn't want to perpetuate that. Overall, these efforts in education and awareness-raising for Armenian causes stem from my own family history and identity as Armenian. As for the Syrian Armenians, I can tell you why I'm involved with them. But if you want to first follow up on anything from the genocide, I can stop here.

Lauren: Why did you then, in 2017, decide to go to Armenia to complete [your research project](#) with Davis Projects for Peace? Your project included gathering the testimonies of about 80 Syrian Armenians among the 22,000 Syrian refugees in Armenia.⁴ These are people who are from families that had fled Armenia between 1914 and 1918 and then returned to their homeland because of the dire circumstances in Syria, am I correct?

³ This quote is, debatably, from Adolf Hitler's speech to Wehrmacht commanders at his Obersalzberg home on August 22, 1939, a week before the German invasion of Poland. A brief summary of the debate on the reference to the Armenian Genocide and its legitimacy can be found in Bardakjian, Kevork B. "Letter to the Editor." *New York Times*. June 18, 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/06/opinion/l-hitler-s-armenian-extermination-remark-true-or-false-103469.html>

⁴ This statistic, reportedly provided by Armenian officials, varies between 20,000 and 22,000 and refers to the number of refugees that passed through. It was reported in 2017 that 15,000 remained in Armenia while others relocated, according to a report, [Economic Integration of Syrian Refugees in Armenia: Needs Assessment Report](#), published under the "Private Sector Development South Caucasus" program implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Anoush: Yes. But I should start by saying that, as I was thinking of applying to different fellowships, I looked for opportunities that would allow me to help with the refugee crisis in some way. I initially considered Greece or Germany because those were the places I focused on most during the summer of 2016 while interning at the Human Rights Watch (HRW) office in New York. However, I started to read articles written by a coworker at the Human Rights Watch office in Washington, D.C., and he was writing about the struggles that Syrian Armenians were facing in Armenia. These articles added something new to what I had read in sources like *The Economist* and *The Guardian*, which highlighted the positive effects that this potentially massive repatriation could bring to Armenia. While I valued that narrative, when reading my co-worker's articles I also thought, "This is what we need to know." Yes, it's great that they're going back to their homeland (albeit a different region of Armenia with a different dialect and history), and obviously, Armenians are going to be very happy that our fellow Armenians have another home to go to, but they're also struggling. And if we only see the positive and the fairytale-like happiness that they are returning home, then they're not going to get the help they need. When I called my colleague Sarkis Balkhian, a Syrian-Armenian working in the D.C. office, and spoke to him about what he thinks the Syrian-Armenian community needs, he immediately agreed that a testimony collection project would be important and necessary. Collecting testimonies is something I was very passionate about as I felt it helped to humanize the situation, and it was something HRW was thinking about doing with other refugee populations, but didn't have the time or resources for. And so, I decided that if I receive grant funding, I'll go to Armenia to work with the organizations aiding Syrian Armenians, and collect those testimonies. So in the fall of my senior year of undergraduate study, I applied to [Fulbright](#), [Napier](#), and [Davis](#). While I applied to Fulbright and Napier as an individual, I was so grateful that my colleague and friend, Ani Schug, could join me in the Davis application. Ani and I had founded and co-run the Armenian Student Association of the Claremont Colleges and she has been an incredible and invaluable partner on this project. When we received the Davis grant, we were both eager to begin, motivated by our shared belief that testimony collection is important for Armenians because one hundred years ago their ancestors fled the Ottoman Empire and many of their stories were not well-preserved.

Lauren: Sorry to interrupt, but I also want to add that it was after the massacres of the Armenians that Raphael Lemkin was inspired to coin the term “genocide.”⁵

Anoush: Thank you. Exactly, right. And no one really knew how to respond to something like this. I was actually very surprised to find so many articles in U.S. newspapers on the United States’ aid to Armenia. There was also a weaker effort for collecting stories, archiving them, and documenting them, so that then Armenians could start a trial and hopefully prosecute those responsible. However, the effort wasn’t substantial enough to quell doubt that the Armenian genocide happened. Watching what’s going on today in Syria, I didn’t want this same thing to happen to the Armenians there. I didn’t want this lack of narrative, this lack of testimony, to allow narratives of denial to dictate the history we tell. And while I wasn’t sure what narratives would arise, I thought at least this would be a way of documenting the details of a people’s experiences, to combat denial of any type. Also, I feel that this type of documentation is in a sense its own form of justice, allowing for certain voices to be heard and potentially filling in the gaps in narrative that will be told by future historians, as well as potentially used to inform court cases. On the matter of preserving memory, anybody who you talk to about Aleppo, even a Syrian who is not Armenian, will tell you that Aleppo was home to a great Armenian community. But now, more than half of the Syrian Armenian community has left Syria, many homes and institutions are destroyed, and it seems that all that remain are the memories. Personally, this makes this very urgent work. I have spoken with aging genocide survivors – I know very few that are left – and their memories are fading. And so, knowing what I do about the Armenian experience, I wanted to capture this moment in history and collect these testimonies to add to the efforts to preserve whatever possible of the Syrian Armenian community before it is too late.

Lauren: What were the most difficult challenges in completing this project, in collecting this testimony?

Anoush: I think the first challenge for me was asking questions in a way that didn’t suggest I thought I knew what the community needed. I also didn’t

⁵ Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-born lawyer who fled Europe for the United States in 1941, published *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1944. On page 79 he coins the word genocide as “a new term and a new conception for destruction of nations.”

want to ask leading questions, and I wanted to be sensitive to the trauma of their experiences. I wanted to be respectful. Language was also a challenge. I don't speak Armenian fluently. I can comprehend it well, but I can't speak that well. I really wanted to get to know these people on a deeper level, but there was this language barrier that I couldn't surpass. Since both Ani and our interpreter spoke great Armenian, understanding the interviewees was not a problem, rather, it was building relationships with people that worried and challenged me. We were invited to dinner, church, and other events with many of our narrators, but I constantly worried about the language barrier. Somehow though, between my broken Armenian, their beginner English, and Ani's help, we found a middle ground and while it was constantly challenging, we were able to build some great relationships and I'm really grateful for that.

One last challenge I faced was a particularly eye-opening one. In learning about the Syrian Conflict from the US, my understanding of it was largely influenced by US media and the narratives circulated there. I was introduced to the idea that the rebels were fighting for democracy and in an all too familiar fashion, the US intervened to support the rebels and promote democracy. Basically, while this conflict is anything but simple, the simplified version I tended to hear was that the rebels were good and the government was bad. But, like any reality, the situation isn't just black and white and throughout the interviews this became more clear. I heard of rebels kidnapping and torturing people while government officials helped protect them. While it's not surprising that there are different narratives depending on who you speak to, I found it challenging to reconcile for myself all the seemingly conflicting realities.

Lauren: Did you find any common themes in the stories of the individuals you interviewed? Something that kept on recurring in your interviews?

Anoush: Yes. One of the themes was that many of them were very glad that Armenia exists as a place of refuge. Even if they were hoping to go on to Europe, or back to Aleppo, they're all very grateful that they had a homeland to return to because many of their friends from Syria did not and their options for escape were refugee camps in Greece, Turkey, or Germany. Another really common theme was that the majority of people we spoke to were friendly with their Muslim neighbors in Aleppo. Many emphasized that there was no difference if you were a Muslim, or Armenian, or Syrian, or Christian, you just were friends. And of course, they did speak about how important it was to maintain a tight-knit

Armenian community, and to go to church, and the cultural center, and to know your history and your language and attend Armenian school, because there are a lot of Armenian schools in Aleppo.

But nonetheless, they had no problem with their Syrian neighbors. And a lot of them did work with them or went to school with them, and they speak very, very normally of them. So that's important because I think the older generations of Armenians, because they were persecuted by Ottomans, learned that the Muslim is an enemy. That now contrasts with generations that have grown up living in Syria and saw them as their neighbor, as another friend. In general, they seem to have, over time, found a way to balance their Armenian identity and being part of that community, while also immersing themselves in the culture of Syria.

Another theme was that no one was sure whether they could return to Aleppo. That was the big question. They all wondered when the war was going to end. Half of them said they wanted to go back to Aleppo when the war ended, and the other half said they wanted to stay in Armenia. That's not necessarily a definitive theme, but I think it's important to recognize that was a common decision people were grappling with and trying to make. The last thing was that almost everyone emphasized the lack of work and the high rent in Armenia. Many organizations help subsidize your apartment for the first six months or until you can get a job. But it's hard to find a job in six months, especially when Armenia doesn't have enough jobs for their own people. So that was a very constant point, and when asked the question, "How could your situation improve?" They said, "Lower the rent." One idea I've heard is that there needs to be more social housing for refugees or a standard stipend for refugees to pay for housing. I don't know if that's going to change or not. One last theme I haven't mentioned yet is that many Syrian-Armenians who have settled in Armenia are creating their own spaces. For example, a group of women I met, when they attended a Sunday service that was overcrowded, asked the priest if he would do their own service on Friday. So now, every Friday from 11 a.m.-12 p.m. they have their own service for the Syrian-Armenian women. It's great that they're creating their own community, but in another way, I worry that they're segregating themselves from the Armenians they're trying to cohabitate with. Overall, it's an interesting dichotomy that I think they all manage very well because they're very happy with their Syrian friends and they have no problem with their Armenian friends. You know, many of them have even opened up their own Syrian-Armenian restaurants, and a lot of the Syrian

Armenians only go to those restaurants. So that's another example of "creating space."

Lauren: And I think it highlights and debunks the news articles you mentioned earlier, praising this return to the homeland as a seamless transition. It also sounds like that, while they are proud of their heritage and speak the language, there's still something inherently Syrian that these refugees are proud to maintain.

Anoush: Yes. Now, most spoke about being happy to be an Armenian in Armenia, which many of them recognize as their homeland but they also greatly valued their upbringing in Syria. There's one woman who says Armenia is like your father who gives you your name and your heritage, and Syria is like your mother who brings you up, and raises you, and takes care of you. Another person said whenever she buys a bag of vegetables, she can't throw out the dirt that's in the bag of vegetables because she says, my ancestors, my parents, my grandparents, they always said "if only I had a little bit of dirt from Armenia to put on my grave." This same woman explained that when leaving Syria, she wanted to go back as soon as she could, but when she saw Mount Ararat from the plane on her way to Armenia, she started crying and knew she had to stay. In a sense, while the pull to return to what she knows and loves in Syria is strong, I think she feels tied to Armenia because she is living a version of a life her ancestors were denied. Another, younger, girl said, "I don't feel like a refugee in this country. While I miss Syria, I feel like I came back to my country." There're both sides of their identity that they're trying to live out. I think it really depends on the person.

Lauren: I'm curious if any of the individuals that you interviewed noted the poignancy of the fact that when many of them were fleeing Syria, it was also the centennial of the genocide. Or perhaps they were just focused on getting to safety. But I'm curious to hear from you if the genocide ever came up in their interviews.

Anoush: So, we asked them about the genocide. We asked them, first, about their genocide story. And then we asked them how they commemorated the genocide back in Syria. And they all told us in Syria, everything, the schools, the Armenian shops, everything closed that day. And everyone in Aleppo, perhaps all of Syria, knew that if your store was closed that day then you were Armenian. They told us there were marches and parades, and they all

spoke so highly about the way Aleppo commemorated the genocide. As to your question regarding whether or not some of our narrators mentioned the coinciding dates, the answer is yes. Some of them did talk about the centennial and how symbolic they felt it was that they were once again, 100 years later, being forced to move out of their homes. One of our concluding questions was whether or not they feel that what happened to them today is similar in any way to what happened to their ancestors 100 years ago. Many of them rejected any notion of similarity, explaining that the Armenians were not targeted for being Armenian this time and this was just a war that they had to escape while the genocide was a systematic plot to exterminate their people. But, there were also many others who felt that what was happening today was very similar to what happened 100 years ago. These people would mention common aggressors, like Turkey, and explain that just like their ancestors, they had to leave everything behind and start new lives again, from nothing. The contrast of these responses was very interesting, and I definitely think the 100 year anniversary of the genocide played a role in forming both sides of opinions, and even in some cases, the time and way they decided to leave and get to safety, as you asked. Some people directly referenced fear of another persecution as their reason for leaving Syria when and how they did, and others directly referenced the different natures of the conflict in justifying why they didn't leave sooner.

Lauren: Armenia is in a delicate position, geographically, and while many Armenians don't identify as a part of what we would call the Middle East, their history has become intertwined with the Middle East; from being a part of the Ottoman Empire, to the genocide, and then to today with the diaspora now from Syria into Armenia, and these huge refugee populations across the world. I would like to hear your opinion on this and how our media places Armenia as a place and a people in the Middle East.

Anoush: I think this is a very interesting and complicated question that requires someone to think about what being a part of a region means. Is it only dependent on arbitrarily decided borders? How much weight do elements like language and culture hold? I'm sure there are answers, or at least theories, to those questions, but I don't know them and so I'm not sure I can satisfactorily answer your question, but I can share my immediate thoughts. I think that it could go both ways. I think because of its geographical location, Armenia could be considered part of the Middle East. But would you consider Russia a part of the Middle East? No. And

Eastern Armenia was a part of the Soviet Union for nearly 70 years, and many Armenians feel a stronger connection to Russia and maybe Georgia than they do to countries in the Middle East. There are still signs all over the country in Russian. The shampoo and other items in the supermarket, a lot of it's from Russia. Students have to learn Russian throughout their schooling. So, I think it's an interesting question and depends on how you approach it. I think it's hard because with the Armenian genocide, we consider that land in Turkey, or the former Ottoman Empire, that is no longer ours, part of Armenia. We called it Western Armenia. Now, if that history is being denied, then we can't claim to belong to that land. During a tour of the Hagia Sophia, I asked my tour guide, what happened to the 1.5 million Armenians. And she said they were "relocated," just like the Bulgarians and other communities. They were just relocating them "for their safety." The issue is that for them, those lands were never considered Armenia. It was always part of the Ottoman Empire. If we, Armenians, wanted to consider ourselves part of the Middle East, we'd need to have that history recognized. And a lot of Armenians want that land in Turkey back. One of the Armenian political parties is very adamant on insisting that Turkey recognizes the genocide and gives us back that land. I am more interested in cultural recognition. I want them to put a sign on the house in Kars where the famous writer Yeghishe Charents lived, and maybe make it a museum. I want commemorative sites saying what the land used to be, just telling the history. I think it's less about getting the lands back and more about living through a history that's been denied. Just acknowledge that we were there and that we built so many of these communities. And so, I think it's hard to consider Armenians part of the Middle East when that part of their history is denied in a sense.

Lauren: That's a great point. It's hard to imagine living in a country where part of your history or part of the identity of the region is denied.

Anoush: Right, and if you're saying that our history is so intertwined with the Middle East, well, let the history textbooks in Turkey represent that. Maybe that's why it's so complicated. Maybe that's why Armenians are torn between saying it's the Middle East or it's not. But the Syrian Armenians for the most part did very much enjoy being from the Middle East. They do consider themselves from the Middle East because they're from Syria. But one thing that I think is really special about being Armenian is that no matter where you live, and I'm generalizing, as an Armenian, being Armenian is a strong part of your identity. This is

something I learned visiting my grandparents' families. In Argentina, they consider themselves Armenians first and then Argentinians. Uruguay, the same thing. I went to Egypt, the same thing. I like meeting with different Armenian communities around the world. Even here in California or in New York. Everywhere I go, whenever I meet another Armenian they are so welcoming and even though we may be so different with regard to our cultures from our host countries, being Armenian seems to mute those differences and I feel as if I have close family around the world. While I can't speak for all Armenians, I think this is a common theme among many diaspora Armenians, that they are Armenian first and then whatever else may be true for them. Being Armenian means you have a homeland in Armenia, but also around the world in each diaspora community that strives to survive. For me, being Armenian is something internal that transcends borders and nationalistic tendencies and I think that's what will enable us to survive many more centuries. No matter how many genocides we face, wars we are caught in the middle of, or how often we are rerouted, being Armenian is something that can never be uprooted, but only re-rooted (for more information, please visit rerooted.org).