



Syrian Armenians Amid Civil War: Experiences, Politics, Transformations



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Introduction

Since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, there has been renewed scholarly attention to the dynamics of ethno-religious belongings and their politicisation within state-society relations, mainly through the framework of sectarianism, albeit in different guises. While a substantial part of the literature has treated sectarianism in often reductionist and rigid ways, there has been a recent complexification of the issue through the introduction of emplaced qualitative methods, ethnographies, and detailed attention to the nuances of social life and their political contingencies (Zeno 2022; Hadaya 2020; Akdedian 2019a). Nonetheless, the focus on how processes of sectarianisation have shaped either the Syrian revolution or the Syrian regime has obscured more attentive, in-depth analyses of specific communities, particularly those that are more peripheral within Syrian politics.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature on ethno-religious communities in the Syrian civil war by focusing on the experiences, politics, and transformations of the Syrian Armenian community. While the presence of Armenians in Syria predates the Arab conquest of the Levant, the Armenian community of Syria can trace most of its presence in the country back to the mass deportation of the survivors of the Ottoman Genocide. Benefiting from semi-structured, in-depth interviews and first-hand accounts in the form of wartime diaries, the paper substantiates three arguments.

First, I suggest that Syrian Armenians and their relationship vi-à-vis the state and nation-building in Syria can be understood within the framework of diasporic communitarianism, which is profoundly shaped by the sense of loss, collective trauma and the need to reconstruct and preserve the community after the genocide. However, this should not be interpreted as opposed to the community's participation in Syria's larger social, economic, cultural, and political life throughout the decades. Instead, I argue that the community has always sought to display its agency under any political circumstance.

Second, the paper argues that the civil war has activated sedimented communitarian fears, reinforced ethno-religious belonging, and created new relations of enmity. The participation of external actors in hostilities and the material destruction of important communal *lieux de mémoire*, such as Aleppo or Kessab, were crucial triggers for the Syrian Armenian community. However, as Akdedian (2019a) reminds us, processes of otherisation and the hardening of socio-cultural boundaries in everyday life overlap with more ‘pluralistic narratives that expose the limits of dehumanization and sectarianization’. Moreover, the community has displayed different political subjectivities across time and space. While an important social segment and leadership has supported al-Assad, this has not been a complete collective endorsement.

Finally, the paper shows how the civil war has impacted the Syrian Armenian community. When explored from the present, the Syrian Armenian community must be understood in its resilience and re-diasporisation. In Syria, a shrunk community seeks to reconstruct its local spaces and sites and find new ways of expressing its agency under different political authorities. In the diaspora, hundreds of thousands of Syrian Armenians have found refuge in Armenia and elsewhere, prompting a reconfiguration of the community that seeks to reconstruct Syria in transnational ways.



Armenians and Syria's Modern State Formation

Between 1915 and the mid-1920s, French colonial authorities estimated that around 200,000 Armenians traversed northern Syria and the desert in their journey from southern and eastern Anatolia to different destinations, with 50,000 of them settling in the city of Aleppo (Watenpaugh 2004, p.601) and smaller communities in Qamishli, Hasakah, Deir Ezzor, Homs, or Damascus. The efforts of mutual Armenian humanitarian relief and resistance against Ottoman authorities' annihilation policies of those who had reached northern Syria were crucial in ensuring the survival of thousands of Armenians (Mouradian 2021).

However, the penetration of the French and British colonial projects in the early post-Ottoman space complexified Armenians' position in Syria. Due to the rise of nationalist movements in that era, while cities like Aleppo had avoided massacres throughout the genocide, hundreds of Armenians would be killed in 1919 in a bloodshed operatives assisted by local individuals as a response to the belief that Armenians were to mobilise and help the French. Many Armenians would seek refuge with the British, who eventually stopped the massacre and arrested some of the perpetrators. This event would signal an early evidence of how 'the threat of some kind of intervention always pushes the community' to whoever can offer a semblance of protection against violence (Interview with Mouradian, 2023).

The Armenians' communal strategies of preservation were favoured by the French authorities that ruled Syria under a Mandate between 1920 and 1946. Syrian citizenship and official status as one of Syria's religious groups were granted to Armenian refugees in September 1924 after the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in July 1923 (Altug 2012). The severely vulnerable situation in which the Armenian community found itself in a convulsed Syria after Ottoman persecution facilitated the acceptance, either actively, coercively, or tacitly, of the Mandate in exchange for social protection, material support, and communal privileges (Watenpaugh 2006). Indeed, the protection, settlement, and political recognition of Armenians, including citizenship and the right to vote, was used by the French to justify the Mandate in front of the League of Nations and to obstruct the National Bloc's political power by altering the sectarian composition of the Syrian electoral base. Convinced that

the improvement of their fate was due to the assistance of Mandate authorities, the Armenians of Aleppo generally voted for moderate candidates, limiting the political power of the National Bloc (Watenpaugh 2006, pp.237-254).

Their hybridity and ambivalence towards colonialism placed the community in a very uncomfortable position in the eyes of Syrian nationalists. As Abrahamyan (2020) suggests, by framing Armenian refugees as “outsiders”, Syrian nationalists sought to define who belonged to the Syrian body politic and who did not. While the Armenian leadership was content with its alignment with French interests, the progressive formation of a boundary separating both communities and forming mutually excluding national identities triggered an important shift within the community, which realised that they had to gradually converge its interests and aspirations with those of most of the local population (Interview with Mouradian, 2023).

Hence, colonial cooperation did not render Syrian Armenians as a mere powerless population at the service of French divide-and-rule policies; instead, Armenians constantly negotiated, reimagined, and reformulated their political, class, and communal identity vis-à-vis colonial authorities and other Syrian communities. Armenians’ institutional, discursive, and material integration allowed the community to navigate and negotiate its role within Syria’s ‘colonial architecture of community’ (Watenpaugh 2006, p.280). This process was powerful and visible in Aleppo. In 1928, the International Nansen Office for Refugees began buying land in the Aleppan northern district of Meidan el-Kebir, currently al-Midan. The definitive settling of Armenians in Aleppo, almost complete by 1936, substituted the approximate 4,000 shelters that composed the refugee camps and enhanced a sense of a modern, middle-class lifestyle (Godard 1938).

Ultimately, the late Mandate years and the early postcolonial period would highlight the incommensurabilities between the Armenian community and Syrian nationalism (Payaslian 2007, p.109). On the one hand, the Armenian communal (re)construction continued after independence, with tolerated special provision of educational needs and a substantial socio-institutional, economic, and cultural habitus. On the other hand, the process of state building in Syria was rift with political and ideological clashes among the different parties of the nationalist spectrum, a polit-



ical spectrum where Armenians hardly found their fit. Ethno-linguistic differences played an essential part in difficulting the articulation of a fully-fledged Armenian political elite, but so did class, social, and ideological differences. Distant from the social bases of the old-ruling Sunni notables, the middle-class radicalism of the Ba'ath, and the ideological pan-Arabism and pan-Syrianism of key political figures such as Sa'adeh, Aflaq, or Hawrani, the Armenian community was progressively perceived as not entirely committed to the legitimacy of the Syrian state (Migliorino 2006).

A Modus Vivendi under al-Assad

While Armenians had successfully navigated the French mandate and the immediate postcolonial period, the community faced a critical turning point in the 1960s with the rise of Nasserism. The radical transformations brought by the Ba'ath rise to power impacted the Armenian community in profound ways: they were neither Arabs nor Arab speakers. The Ba'athist mobilisation of revolutionary nationalism and pan-Arabism reduced Armenians' socio-cultural autonomy and public life, as forming a new national identity 'from above' (Hinnebusch 2001) narrowed the space for sub-state identities to articulate their distinctiveness. Christian and Armenian educational institutions were put under the spotlight, their curriculum directly supervised, and their ownership, despite the opposition of the clergy, totally or partially seized. As Roger Asfar (2019, pp.96-97) puts it, this became the first lesson of the Ba'ath: the Christian clergy's authority and capacity to mediate would be limited under its rule. Moreover, freedom of the press and autonomy of association became severely curtailed, especially in 1969 when the government of Salah Jadid introduced new legislative amends that further increased state control over associations. Hence, while the Armenian community could solidify its presence and even thrive within the country's economic and cultural milieus despite Ba'ath policies of Arabisation, it lacked an effective voice of its own (Payaslian 2007).

Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970 meant the transformation of the Ba'athist state 'from an instrument of class revolution into a machinery of power in the service of *raison d'état*' (Hinnebusch 2001, p.61). The gradual construction of Syrian nationalism under al-Assad aimed to subsume Syria's different social and identity segments under a cohesive and distinctively Syrian national identity, thus recalibrating the effects of the former regime's revolutionary notions (Mufti 1996, pp.232-252). As Aldoughli (2022, p.130; 132) points out, Arabism was reworked 'to merge with the territorial state identity' and allow the emergence of a type of nationalism that 'celebrated bonds of love and loyalty to the Syrian state and its authoritarian regime'. Hence, while Arab nationalism remained central to his rhetoric, al-Assad's nation-building project sought to downplay and politically deactivate ethnic, sectarian, and tribal identities to create a feeling of commonality among Syrians (Dukhan 2022).



However, this formation of a ‘primordial nationalist cult’ (Aldoughli 2022, p.137) around Syria’s distinctive history and cultural identity did not mean that sub-state communities were totally overlooked by the regime. On the contrary, nationalist ideology coexisted with neo-patrimonial mobilisation and exploitation of ethno-sectarian and tribal identities at the service of the regime’s authoritarian consolidation (Dukhan 2022). Hence, Assad’s governmental project fostered a form of exclusionary inclusion by which communal identities were formally dissolved but informally tapped into to mobilise communal solidarity in favour of the regime’s legitimacy. Ultimately, these dynamics ended up reinforcing exclusionary dichotomies and antagonistic identities in the absence of a genuine discourse of cosmopolitanism from above in Syria, as the regime simultaneously ordered and organised its subjects’ in an equal and unequal manner’ (Rabo 2012, p.144).

Within this framework, Migliorino (2008) suggests, the Armenian community was able to secure a newly transformed relationship with the Syrian state, a more comfortable *modus vivendi*, characterised by greater communal autonomy in exchange for active support or, at least, acquiescence. Over the decades, this progressive formation of Armenians as a politically “trusted” community meant flourishing public expressions of Armenian identity and autonomous control over churches, schools, newspapers, and the tolerated use of the Western Armenian dialect. Paradigmatic of this new space of tolerance to Armenian public expression, the government allowed a “pilgrimage” to Deir Ezzor in 1985 to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the genocide; some years later the new Genocide Memorial in Deir Ezzor would be built and consecrated (Pasaylan 2007, p.116).

Under Bashar, the Armenian community did not experience radical transformations. However, there were meaningful changes in certain areas, particularly regarding the parameters of Syrian Armenians’ everyday life at the political, cultural, and economic levels, as well as the regime’s instrumentalisation of the community. First, Armenians’ political participation oscillated between ‘responding to political mobilization “from above”’ and the maintenance and deepening of communal interests (Ibid, p.120). Tolerated parties acted as networks linking communities inside Syria with the transnational Armenian diaspora, adding to the dense communal safety net of schools, churches, and associations. As Migliorino (2006) puts it, Armenian clubs

and the diverse social activities of churches emerged as ‘true islands of Armenian-ness’ that quietly strengthened their identity and autonomous role despite the official regime policies. Avo, one of my informants from Aleppo, highlights: ‘Before the war, I decided to go and live in al-Midan, and there I found my people, those who came after the genocide, and I was honestly happy...it was a life of real community, doing activities all the time, a routine full of events’ (Interview with Avo 2018).

Nonetheless, there is a certain degree of political empowerment and efficacy that appears curbed under Bashar al-Assad. In the wake of the rapprochement between Assad’s Syria and Turkey, Armenians were again securitised and compromised to further enhance the regime’s control and sustained survival. While this does not change Armenians’ position vis-à-vis the regime profoundly, it does suggest that communal autonomy is tolerated to the extent that it does not threaten the bigger political and economic picture (Interview with Mouradian 2023).

Second, the Syrian regime experienced significant transformations under Bashar, particularly concerning its political economy and the extension of its support bases (Hinnebusch 2019). Nevertheless, urban Christians of all denominations largely benefited from neoliberal policies and were able to access important economic benefits. The growth of the tourism industry, the cultural promotion of Christian sites, and the progressive conversion of Syria’s plurality into a consumable commodity provided Armenians with a bigger platform to project social and cultural capital. In Aleppo, lucrative activities such as converting old houses into restaurants were almost exclusively monopolised by Christians, and their acquisition depended fundamentally on connections and influence with Archbishops and the Christian *awqaf*. Internally, this was used to cultivate a feeling of comfort and protection among Christian constituencies, particularly during the destabilising effects of the Iraq War, and thus solidify their support of the regime. Externally, the regime aimed to portray the idea of a stronger presence of Christian communities in the public sphere to project a secular, cosmopolitan narrative that stressed the idea of national unity in diversity.

Hence, before 2011, two tensions regarding the Syrian Armenian community were worth noting. First, the tension between enclosed communitarianism and cos-



mopolitan coexistence. In most of my conversations with Syrian Armenians, especially those from Aleppo, narratives of socio-spatial segregation and communal containment (often including references to feelings of strangeness and/or insecurity regarding other parts of the city) coexist with narratives that highlight the everyday interaction with other identities and the peaceful “mosaic” of Aleppo. During our interview (2023), Anoush Baghdassarian rightly suggested that there were critical generational differences, with younger Armenians less isolated than older generations despite the general tendency towards self-containment. Second, the tension between marginalisation and belonging. While the early decades of the Ba’ath regime marginalised and restricted the integration of Syrian Armenians into the nation-building project of the time, the community’s long limited presence in state institutions and deep communal strategies of identity preservation have not prevented the ample participation of Syrian Armenians in the private sector, the development of a distinctive middle class, and the strengthening of national belonging (Della Gatta 2019).

The Armenian Community in Wartime

The Syrian uprising brought politics back to the centre of state-society relations in Syria. Indeed, it unravelled ‘seemingly settled questions of peoplehood, identity and national community’ (Ismail 2011, p.538) and opened the door to a different articulation of socio-cultural identities, including religious belonging. In reimagining Syria’s political field, sectarian differences were both mobilised and dissolved within the early days of the uprising. On the one hand, the popular movement sought to mobilise specific communal identities and engage in practices on a communal basis to widen the struggle against the regime. However, on the other hand, the uprising aimed to dissolve sectarian differences in favour of a reimagined national community bounded by equal and cosmopolitan citizenship (Brønd 2016, p.23).

The Syrian Armenian community saw the uprising with scepticism and reservation. It is essential to differentiate between the official position of religious leaders and the community’s thoughts in its diversity. Regarding the former, the various official statements and positions of church leaders suggest full support for Assad. In fact, in April 2011, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, Aram I, rapidly stated the leadership support for the state and the reforms that Assad had promised to bring peace and prosperity to the country (Noyan Tapan 2011).

Regarding the community, one can see far greater nuances and plurality of orientations. Most Syrian Armenians were content with their situation before 2011 and saw the uprising as a potentially destabilising event that could compromise that comfortable space. Indeed, this prompted parts of the community to display open support for the regime by joining pro-Assad marches. Many others were expectant and desired that the uprising would ‘lead into some sort of dialogue...based on an agenda to introduce peaceful and gradual changes’ (Sanjian 2016, p.20). In fact, many informants point out that segments of the Armenian community displayed the well-known duality between a public disengagement and rejection of the events and a private, almost underground support or sympathy towards the reformist horizon of the uprising. Avo supported the uprising and reflected upon the difficulties of that time and how his familiar space started to change: ‘I was very alone in my neighbourhood...they didn’t like my narrative and didn’t trust me because I oppose the



regime...I don't trust them either because they were not acting rightly; they needed to see the whole picture. This was very tense for me because suddenly, I started feeling uncomfortable in my own neighbourhood' (Interview with Avo 2018).

From the beginning, Syrian Armenians' space to manoeuvre was limited by both the opposition and the regime. Concerning the opposition, Armenians were not able to articulate solid relations with any of the major opposition factions, and no Armenian representation took part in second-track diplomatic efforts despite informal contact with different oppositional institutions (Mayala 2012; Sanjian 2016). At the same time, parts of the opposition mistakenly identified the official statements of church leaders (bluntly pro-Assad) to be the sole attitude of Syrian Christians (Sabbagh 2015), alienating potential dissidents and weakening the effectiveness of oppositional actions in neighbourhoods with substantial Christian presence.

As far as the regime was concerned, it rapidly activated fear and anxiety as mechanisms of securitisation. As Sabbagh (Ibid) argues, the regime sought to instil the feeling that the survival of Christian communities was in great danger. Such fears were activated relatively quickly, for it was not a new regime tactic vis-à-vis Christians. During our conversation, Jala, a young Armenian from Aleppo, points at the effects of being socialised in fear: 'We have been taught since kids to be afraid of Muslims in Aleppo...our parents told us stories of genocide, persecution exile... we grew in that environment...Aleppo is the city that welcomed Armenians. We did not trust anyone' (Interview with Jala 2018). Hence, the regime used several mechanisms to tap into these social fears (sedimented but not necessarily activated, even less violently) mainly through rumours, hyperbolic narratives of anxiety, and the mobilisation of collective memory, including different historical episodes of sectarian violence. In Damascus, rumours suggesting that protesters and Islamic extremists were planning to attack Christian neighbourhoods and churches in neighbourhoods such as Qassaa' or Bab Touma sought to reify collective existential anxiety and push the community towards active mobilisation (Hadaya 2020; Sabbagh 2015; Interview with Riff 2018).

Early Responses and Experiences of War

The militarisation of the uprising emerged as a critical trigger point for the community and opened new dilemmas. Notably, the memory of the Lebanese Civil War made parts of the community draw parallels and engage in a debate over the most adequate way to respond to the unfolding scenario while protecting the community's interests. In Syria, adopting the Lebanese model of "positive neutrality" was very difficult due to several factors, mainly concerning the nature of the Syrian state and the community's relationship with it. From most of my conversations with Syrian Armenians, one can sense the will to stress a clear and genuine commitment towards Syria's statehood, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, part product of the memory of the Lebanese civil war trajectory and part due to the limited strength and leverage vis-à-vis the Syrian state (much more coercive and active in governing communal relations than in Lebanon). This should not be understood as a complete endorsement of Assad and full display of loyalty, as I argued before; instead, in a moment of uncertainty and progressive breakdown of the state, Syrian Armenians largely display a behaviour that is deeply coded into the community's experience and seeks to make use of whatever space is left to articulate political agency in the direction of protecting, securing, and assisting the needs of the community (Interview with Mouradian, 2023; Abi Haider 2014).

As the country descended into an open military confrontation in 2012, the question of forming self-defence units and arming Christian populations emerged prominently. In Damascus, the epicentres of such questions were the traditionally Christian quarters of the Old City. While church leaders had rejected the arming of Christians (Sabbagh 2015, p.87), on the ground, several residents were armed and enlisted in the National Defence Forces (NDF), working as vigilante units in the neighbourhoods. 'We decided to defend ourselves here. Youth from the area enlisted in the NDF. They received arms to defend the area, especially those points vulnerable to unknown entrances,' commented Abu Georges, a local from Bab Touma (2018). In Aleppo, the earliest forms of militarisation consisted of dozens of Boy Scout vigilantes who sought to protect churches and their surroundings. However, the situation became increasingly complex and violent in 2012, as rebel forces pen-



etrated several districts of the city and the regime shelling intensified. The leaders of the three Armenian churches of Aleppo issued a joint statement clarifying their position and rejecting any official involvement of the community in armed clashes (Armstrong and Williams 2012; Mayala 2012). As in Damascus, the rejection of the church leadership from officially being armed and involved in the battle did not prevent the armed mobilisation of parts of the local Armenian community. As the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other rebel battalions were getting closer to the neighbourhoods with higher presence of Christian population (al-‘Azizieh, al-Jdeideh, al-Siryān, Slemanie, or al-Midan), hundreds of Armenians accepted arms from the regime and joined the NDF to prevent the FSA from infiltrating their neighbourhoods (Sherlock 2012; Balanche 2014; Asfar 2017).

The formation of Armenian armed voluntary groups and the spatial dynamics of the militarisation of urban space in Aleppo hardened pre-existing spatial maps and boundaries. However, the material reification of this division came through the production of the East Aleppo-West Aleppo fault line and the consolidation (albeit porous in many regards) of two different socio-material spaces. Beyond the well-known Karaj al-Hajez of Bustan al-Qasar, which became the only passage between the regime-controlled and the rebel-controlled parts of Aleppo, a different front-line was consolidated northwest of the city across the neighbourhoods of al-Jdeideh, al-‘Azizieh, Sleimanie, and al-Midan.

Intense clashes and mortar shelling from rebel-controlled districts became commonplace from 2012 as rebel battalions tried to penetrate and control parts of western Aleppo. Indeed, the destruction of churches and everyday spaces inhabited by local Christian communities has a very strong presence in the informants’ narrations and written recollections of those years. The attack and desecration of St. Kevork church in al-Midan in late October 2012 marked the starting point of a profound transformation of the Aleppan Armenian community, their experiences of war, and their discourses regarding inter-communal relations in the city (The Armenian Weekly, 2012). As Mollica and Hakobyan (2021, p.175) argue, the destruction of St. Kevork activated collective memories of a lost homeland and the genocide, as the different layers of memory and commemorating sites of past massacres within the church were set ablaze. ‘It felt exactly as an existential threat...they were hitting



us, destroying our churches...they wanted the city without Christians' Hagop, an informant from Aleppo, highlights (2019). In many interviews, references to adjacent neighbourhoods controlled by rebel forces such as Bustan al-Basha articulated discourses of enmity and antagonism towards a purported enemy that was at once material and existential, local and transnational.



External Actors and the Existential Threat

Certainly, the multifaceted involvement of many external actors in the Syrian civil war (funding and supporting rebel militias and directly intervening across the border) has played a significant role in shaping the experiences of Syrian Armenians in Aleppo and other parts of Syria. This external involvement in Syria linked the collective past with the present, materialising the fears and anxieties of the community in specific places – places that are everyday geographies and sites of memory altogether. Edward Dark, a pseudonym for an Aleppan activist, writer, and freelance journalist, captured (2014) the affective atmosphere surrounding the Christian communities of Aleppo with these words:

‘Fear is palpable in this city; it hangs heavy in the air everywhere you go, like a potent and nauseous perfume... But fear of a new kind permeates this ancient and deeply rooted community. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are very real threats that haunt the collective conscience of Syria’s Christians.’

For Avo (2018), the anti-Assad Aleppan Armenian, the experiences of war and displacement radically shaped the political subjectivity of a large part of the community: ‘For many, history was repeating itself... From the beginning, the community took a particular political position because they were sure that Turkey was involved in this story [the war]’. From 2014, the rapid circulation of an archive of death composed of images, videos, and stories of violence, injury and destruction intensified the feeling of existential anxiety of Armenians and other Christian communities across several spaces. In addition to the events in Aleppo and Maaloula (from September 2013), the attack against the town of Kessab in March 2014, the destruction of the Genocide Memorial of Deir Ezzor in September, and the Islamic State takeover of Mosul in July would be experienced as a collective corroboration of Christians’ fragile presence in the territory and fear of repetition of previous massacres.

Remarkably, the assault of Kessab between the 21st and the 23rd of March shocked the Syrian Armenian collective consciousness. The town, located northwest of Syria and very close to the border with Turkey, possesses enormous symbolic significance as the presence of Armenians is linked back to the medieval Kingdom of Cilicia.

Hagop Tcholakian's *The Three Days of Kessab* (2015) is a fascinating first-hand account of the events and their significance for the community. Throughout his narration, one can see a tripartite issue emerging prominently: the relationship of Kessabian Armenians with the border, Turkey, and nearby Turkmen villages. As Mollica and Hakobyan (2021, p.221) put it, the border became an identity marker for the community and the shaping of traumatic episodic memory signalled by excruciating experiences of war. Several accounts point at the Turkish disengagement from the border throughout that March as divisions of the FSA converged around Antakya with other jihadist factions as part of the al-Anfal offensive (Tcholakian 2015, p.41; Glass 2015). Around 4,000 Kessabians, half of whom were local Armenians, abandoned the town (Tcholakian 2015, p.25) as the combined rebel operation marched towards the town. As one of my informants recalls, the community was very organised in the defence and evacuation of Kessab, blocking roads, activating communal institutions and paramilitary units, and mobilising the Armenian community and churches of Latakia who welcomed most of the displaced from Kessab (Interview with Maria 2023). The rebel takeover of Kessab did not only raise fears and revived past traumas, but also the participation of local Turkmen communities in the area north of Latakia (Tcholakian 2015, p.32; 35), which for many was reminiscent of the 1909 plunder of Kessab and the events of 1915 (Ibid, pp.27-29; Mollica and Hakobyan, pp.224-229).

The regime instrumentalised collective feelings of trauma and the spectre of genocide that emerged as the result of wartime destruction, displacement, and political fragmentation in multiple scenarios. A great example of this dynamic is the #SaveKessab campaign that unfolded on social media. As Elyse Semerdjian (2014) reminds us, Armenian fears and memories of collective traumas are not baseless; still, the instrumentalisation of the tragedy suggests that what happened in Kessab should not be explored in relation to the involvement of external actors alone but also to the civil war matrix and the regime counteroffensive and political narrative against rebel advances. The spread of fake news and photographs and the magnification of the levels of destruction and death served the regime's campaign of portraying itself as the protector of Christians in Syria (ibid; Al-Arabiya News 2014).



In Aleppo, mortar shelling and attacks intensified throughout 2015, and in July, spurred by rebel advances in Idlib and the formation of Jaysh al-Fatah, rebel forces attempted to launch an assault into regime-controlled western Aleppo. This would become the first attempt by the militants to break the division in the city since the beginning of the hostilities in 2012, which would amplify the levels of destruction of key sites of the community. Sections of al-Midan and other neighbourhoods with important Armenian landmarks would be severely destroyed as regime and opposition lines violently clashed throughout 2015 and 2016 (The Armenian Weekly 2014; Alsabagh 2017, pp. 25, 54; Antaki and Sabé 2018). In early January 2015, the Armenian Catholic Cathedral of St. Rita was partially destroyed by mortar shelling (Barsoumian 2015), and in late April, the Forty Martyrs Church in Al-Jdeideh was severely damaged as well (The Armenian Weekly 2015).

On 13 December 2016, an agreement between rebel forces and the Syrian regime, decisively brokered by Russia and Turkey, put an end to the siege on Eastern Aleppo and started shifting the course of the war. By 23 December, the day the fighting in Aleppo officially ended, more than 35,000 people had been displaced from eastern Aleppo (UN News Service 2016). Despite the maintenance of the status quo in the western quarters of the city throughout the war and their welcoming of ceased hostilities, the Armenian community had suffered substantial changes, and the evolution of the civil war from 2017 would unravel a new reality for the community and its relationship with the regime throughout the country.

The Transformation of the Syrian-Armenian Community: Exile, Reconstruction, Rearticulation

Since 2011, more than 20,000 Syrians have left Syria and settled in Armenia. Armenian authorities and a vast network of NGOs and charities have given them housing assistance, helped them integrate into the local economy, and offered simplified legal procedures to claim citizenship status or extended residence permits. This exodus to the homeland, in the absence of the real possibility of reconstituting the imagined homeland of Western Armenia, is interpreted by many through the prism of genocide (Della Gatta 2019; Mollica and Hakobyan 2021) through formulas such as ‘round-trip genocide’ or ‘second genocide’ (Interview with Jala 2018).

Interestingly, while the Syrian Armenian community sought to maintain and advance a distinctive communal life and identity within the Syrian tapestry, those who settled in Armenia sought to recreate and preserve a unique Syrian identity in Armenia (Levkowitz 2023). This has reinforced Syrian-Armenian belonging as a form of diasporic or exilic identity that captures and expresses the complexities of a process that mutually reinforces communal identity and national belonging. Contrary to an essentialist approach, the Armenian exilic return to Armenia ‘has not implied a fulfilment of their ethnic identity’; rather, it has rearticulated Armenian and Syrian belonging in new ways (Della Gatta 2019). Indeed, economic difficulties, the feeling of estrangement and longing for a lost past, and linguistic and cultural differences have contributed to a renewed attachment to Syria. Moreover, Syrian Armenians’ settlement in Armenia has allowed the reproduction of a Syria outside Syria, particularly if one considers the city of Aleppo. Nostalgia for a lost home appears here as discursive and material, as many Aleppan Armenians are recreating the smells, flavours, shops, businesses, and activities that once characterised their daily lives. The establishment of the Aleppo Shopping Centre, the blooming Syrian restaurants throughout the capital, and even the envisaged creation of a housing complex called “New Aleppo” are testimony of this dynamic (Tavitian 2017; Üngör 2019; Petrosyan 2023).



Anoush Baghdassarian and Ani Schug's *Reroot Project* provides a fabulous repository of Syrian Armenian narratives and experiences regarding exile, the war in Syria, and their settlement in Armenia. Reading their multiple testimonies, one can see how Syria appears as a beloved motherland, part and parcel of their national attachments and socio-cultural belongings, which they seek to replicate in Armenia. As Anoush (2023) states in our interview: 'All of the Syrian Armenian restaurants here are packed every night...every church is packed out the door... they have built a community for themselves, and they have enough people and relatives and friends to make a new Syrian Armenian enclave'.

The substantial emigration of Syrian Armenians has not meant the end of the community's presence in places like Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, or Kessab. However, the weakening of the community in demographic terms, the wartime experiences of violence and destruction, new regime discourses and policies, and the breakdown of territorial control throughout these years have shaped Syrian Armenian political subjectivities in profound ways.

First, internal demographic movements and the transformation of everyday spaces affected by the war have brought 'border anxieties in the construction of the other' (Simonsen 2010) for many Syrian Armenians, as previous spatial boundaries and mental maps have collapsed and new subjectivities traverse familiar spaces (Interview with Maria 2023). In my conversation with Jala (2018), she referred to how shifting demographics and spatial relations in the city affected her gendered and sectarian imaginaries: 'Without Christians, I don't know anything about this city...All those people [meaning Aleppans displaced from the east and south of the city] live in al-'Azizieh. When you walk around, there are a lot of burkas. There is nothing familiar here now.' Remarkably, these changes also run through class and origin lines within the Armenian community itself. In this regard, Hagop (2019) states: 'The people changed...when I go to church, I see different faces...I haven't seen them before. And they were Armenian, too! They moved from another area to my area. This is not the Aleppo I used to know'".

Second, despite the community's shrinking and the transformation of everyday experiences mentioned above, the Armenian community has maintained its pres-

ence and kept running schools, universities, cultural spaces, and charities, albeit at a slower pace. Indeed, the reconstruction of churches during these last years has been of capital importance for the community. The regime has prioritised the reconstruction of crucial communal landmarks, such as the Forty Martyrs Cathedral in Aleppo, which was the first to be restored in late 2016 and wholly repaired in March 2019. For Aram I, the church's reconstruction was a sign that 'the Armenian community will continue to reconstruct Syria' (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator 2019). Moreover, in a meeting in late 2018 with leaders of the Syrian Armenian community in Armenia and businessmen, Assad promised to restore the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church of Deir Ezzor (Armenpress 2019). Crucially, it is worth noting the expanded role of the Christian clergy, which have acted as both mediators and dynamists of the reconstruction as it has been one of the few constituencies which has had access to international funds uninterruptedly thanks to their worldwide connections and network of donations and aid (Asfar 2019; Interview with Roger Asfar 2023; Akdedian 2019b).

Third, the Armenian issue is also an important component of the regime's discursive relations as al-Assad seeks to produce new political subjectivities through the redefinition of ethno-religious belongings across lines of political loyalty. Elements like permanence in Syria, trusted returns, and reconstruction are prominent in such discursive articulations. For instance, in a meeting with Aram I, Bashar al-Assad explicitly requested the return of Syrian Armenians who fled the country by referring to their 'patriotic spirit' and national loyalty, describing them as 'exemplary citizens', labelling anti-regime groups as 'terrorist barbarism', and comparing them to the Ottoman massacres (Agenzia Fides 2019). While some reconstruction projects funded by Armenians are on their way in Aleppo, the question of return is far more contentious. Most Syrian Armenians enjoy the possibility of a relatively straightforward entrance into Syria, which eases the security concerns and the journey back into the country (Interview with Maria 2023). This, in turn, feeds the loop of the regime narrative, which uses the question of return and rehabilitation of the community to project political legitimacy. Indeed, throughout my conversations with Syrian Armenians living abroad and in written diasporic accounts, return appears desirable, filled with affective qualities. However, despite such rhetoric, the situation in Syria still prevents their return *en mass*.



Finally, it is essential to point out that Syrian Armenians have also had to establish new relations with authorities emerging from the territorial and political breakdown caused by the civil war. This is particularly relevant in the northeast, where the experience of the Islamic State violence, the emergence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the creation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (AANES) have shaped the community. In places like Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and the Jazira region, Christians of all denominations suffered substantial denial of their freedoms under the IS, and even after the territorial disintegration of the group, assassinations and bombings have endangered the presence of the remaining community (Hamou and Christou 2019; Khalifa 2023).

However, with the establishment of the AANES, Syrian Armenians living in the northeast have had the possibility of articulating social, political, and military relations with an authority different from al-Assad. ‘The Armenians of the northeast, of Qamishli for instance, see themselves as a community within a larger community that has protected it and hosted’, Maria (2023) states. As Mouradian (2023) argues in our interview, what has saved the Syrian Armenian community throughout the decades has been its capacity to establish connections and relationships with different constituencies, even if they are understood by many as responsible for committing massacres against the community.

One of the ways in which Syrian Armenians in the AANES are articulating their precarious political agency (given the legacy of the IS, external actors’ interventions, and small demographic presence) is through the creation of an all-Armenian battalion within the SDF. The Martyr Nubar Ozanyan Battalion, named after a communist revolutionary who died fighting the IS in Raqqa in 2017, was established in March 2019 in Tel Tamer and fought against the Turkish “Peace Spring Operation” of that year. The fight against Turkey and the establishment of good multi-ethnic relations in the AANES appear as the main discursive axes of the battalion. In one of their propaganda videos, a member of the battalion asserts: ‘We are here as Armenians and revolutionaries. And as the Kurds, we are fighting a common enemy: the Turkish state. We fight for the unification of different oppressed nations. And we have, as Armenians and Kurds, a common enemy that prevents our peoples from being free. This is the struggle we are doing today against the Turkish state’ (Redfish 2021).



Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the experiences, politics, and transformations of the Syrian Armenian community throughout the Syrian civil war. While these paragraphs present a detailed analysis and focus on the specificities of Armenians, it is crucial to remember that loss, pain, and the struggle to access the political are shared by all Syrians, regardless of their background. Indeed, this is an essential caveat regarding Syrian Armenians, too, for their historical trajectories and political vicissitudes cannot be disentangled from those of Syria itself.

The Syrian Armenian storyteller and artist Sona Tatoyan argues (2014) that ‘being Anatolian-Armenian is an exercise in gluing pieces of yourself and your history together’. From their very first days as genocide survivors and refugees, Armenians found in Syria a new homeland where the community could be reconstructed and rerouted. Throughout instrumentalised, coercive, or more laxative power relations, Syrian Armenians have found formal and informal ways to preserve and expand communal interests without renouncing Syrian national belonging. Even with a substantial part of the community experiencing a new process of rediasporisation and fracturing, attachments to Syria and a beloved lost home (indeed, the desire to rebuild Syria outside Syria) feature remarkably in Armenians’ accounts of war and exile.

The war in Syria has ruptured the fabric of community life to such an extent that it has brought enormous and traumatic transformations, making impossible any return to a status quo ex-ante. This is also true for the Syrian Armenian community, which has seen its landscape of churches, sites of memory, and everyday spaces profoundly severed. The activation of the community’s fears, historically sedimented and politically mobilised, has contributed to the partial hardening of lines of antagonism and otherisation within Syria’s ethno-communal tapestry. However, the remaining populations in places like Aleppo, Damascus, Kessab, Deir Ezzor or Hama also try to wave the fragments together in various ways and under different political authorities, suggesting far more complex political subjectivities.



And certainly, the future of Syrian Armenians is also the future of Syria, its diversity and plural urban spaces. The case of Aleppo is paradigmatic here, where the massive wartime destruction and violence have ruptured the community and, in a reinforcing dynamic, the Syrian Armenian exodus adds another layer of loss for the city. As Alia Malek beautifully says (2012), what would Aleppo be ‘without the magic of Armenian characters on churches, schools, and storefronts throughout its streets? What would Halabi (Aleppan) cuisine be without the spicier influences of Western Armenia? Who would we be without our colleagues, neighbors, and friends’.



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