

## THE ARMENIAN MOTHERLAND –THE FINAL HOME OF DIASPORA ARMENIANS

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Armenia: cradle of the Armenian people, historically and geographically is located in Western Asia. All Armenian states have been organized here, among which was the Armenian Empire established by the King of Kings Tigran the Great (95-55 B.C.). As the Arab authors stated, the title of Tigran was enriched by another name, which is connected with the Roman consul and famous orator Cicero. Arab historian Marwan al-Mudawar on citing Cicero, indicates that he “called Tigran II ‘The Great King of Asia’ - ‘Maliq Asiya al-Azim’”<sup>1</sup>. In fact the same definition we find in the Islamic Encyclopaedia. The Arab historians collecting all those titles of Tigran II called him “Tigran II the Great, King of Kings and the Great King of Asia”, and Armenia - “Empire of Tigran II the Great, King of Kings and the Great King of Asia”. These facts come to confirm the undeniable truth that the Armenian king Tigran II was one of the greatest world-famous royal figures of his time and could create the Armenian Empire.

Armenia is the first nation and country in the world to officially proclaim Christianity as the state religion in 301. The ancient Armenian civilization in the Christian epoch had been enriched with new values of written sources and the areas of science, architecture, arts, etc.

One of the first Armenian communities formed in the neighbouring Near Eastern region was in Jerusalem. Victor Azarya has provided extremely important and unique information concerning this in his valuable study<sup>2</sup>. He notes that the Armenians had their own special quarter in the Old City, the Armenian Quarter, which was one of the four quarters of the city<sup>3</sup>: a number of the most important holy places were and continue to remain under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Apostolic Church, as the Monastery of St. James and the House of Annas and the Palace of Caiaphas. The Armenian Church together with the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches oversees the Holy Sepulcher of the Lord, the Tomb of St. Maria at Gethsemane, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem<sup>4</sup>, etc. After the Arab conquest of Jerusalem, the position of the Armenian Church remained steadfast. V. Azarya points out that the leader of the Armenian Church, foreseeing the Arabs' impending invasion of Jerusalem, departed for Mecca

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<sup>1</sup> Marwan al-Mudawar. *Armenians Throughout of History*. Beirut. 1982, p. 149 (in Arabic). Հովհաննիսյան Ն., Տիգրան Մեծը և Հայկական կայսրությունը արաբական ժամանակակից պատմագիտության մեջ, Պատմա-քանասիրական հանդես, 2007, 2, էջ 55-71:

<sup>2</sup> Victor Azarya. *The Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem. Urban Life Behind Monastery Walls*. London, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> The other three were the Christian, Moslem and Jewish Quarters.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Azarya. *op. cit.*

and received an edict from Prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam, which guaranteed the safety of the life and property of Armenians living in Jerusalem. The founder of Islam recognized the rights of the Armenian Apostolic Church in all of those holy places under her supervision<sup>5</sup>. And when the Caliph Omar seized Jerusalem in 638, he confirmed with a new edict "Fetva", all of the rights which the Prophet Mohammed gave to the Armenian Church. The Armenians had built many churches and monasteries in Jerusalem and around it. Anastas, one of the Armenian religious leaders, who visited Jerusalem in the mid- 6<sup>th</sup> century noted that there were about seventy Armenian churches in that region. Later on the Ayubide dynasty and its founder Saladin (Salah ad-Din) (1171-1193), the ruler of Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia, confirmed the rights of the Armenian Church<sup>6</sup>. In later centuries new communities of Armenians were formed. However, the modern Armenian Diaspora was formed as a result of the 1915-1923 Armenian Genocide, the first genocide of the 20th century perpetrated by the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Western Armenia (which were annexed by the Ottoman Empire in 1639 by the Perso-Turkish treaty of Kasr-i-Shirin). There are three fundamental issues on the problem under discussion. First, the arising of the Armenian communities in the Near East and Syria as a consequence of the Genocide; second, the three main stages of their development and their characteristics; and third, the perspectives of their existence.

The Armenian Genocide planned by the criminal leadership of the Young Turks, was carried out on two levels. First, the mass murder of 1,5 million Armenians in their native land, Western Armenia, in the provinces (vilayets) of Karin-Ezrum, Sebastia (Sivas), Kharberd (Kharpert), Baghesh (Bitlis), Van and Amid (Diarbekir), and in all of the parts inhabited by Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. Second, the annihilation of the deported 800,000 Armenians in the Arabian deserts (particularly Deir el-Zor<sup>7</sup>), in the territories of Syria and Iraq, through which the caravans of forcibly exiled Armenians passed. The Young Turks leadership believed that the Moslem Arabs would continue their bloody deed. But they were greatly mistaken. When the caravans of Armenian refugees appeared in the territories of Syria, Iraq and other Arab lands, the unexpected took place. The Arab population, which hated the Ottoman domination and was preparing to rebel against the Turkish yoke, not only did not join the bloodthirsty Turks, but subjecting themselves to danger, offered help to the Armenian exiles, and opened the doors of their hearts and homes to them. Thanks to them hundreds of thousands of Armenian refugees were saved from the unavoidable claws of death. This is one of the brightest demonstrations of noble humanitarianism in international history. Hence, in the future this welcoming attitude played a decisive role for the settlement of Armenians and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Հովհաննիսյան Ն., Արաբական երկրների պատմություն, հ. I, Արաբները VII դարից մինչև 1516 թ., Երևան, 2003, էջ 328-330:

<sup>7</sup> Arissian N., The Armenian Genocide in the Syrian Press. See: The Armenian Genocide. Cultural and Legal Legacies. Edited by Richard Hovhannisian, New Brunswick and London, 2007, p. 306.

formation of today's Armenian diaspora in Syria and in the other Arab countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt).

By committing the genocide against the Armenians as well as the Greeks of Pontus and the Syrians of Hakyar and other places, the Moslem Turks in the Ottoman Empire rudely broke and trampled over such a concept of Islam, as Zimmi states<sup>8</sup>. Thus this Islamic rule was continually violated in the Ottoman Empire and during the First World War. This was manifested by massacres of the masses, genocide and deportation. This crime of the Young Turks, which was an affront to Islam, was strictly condemned by such an irreproachable authority as the Sheriff of Mecca and Governor of Hijaz, Husein ibn Ali al-Hashimi, who was a descendent of the same Hashimi dynasty as the founder of Islam, Prophet Mohammed. He was very popular with the entire Muslim world, conditioned by two important circumstances. First, he was the direct descendant of the founder of Islam, Prophet Mohammed's Kureishi tribe's Hashimi family. Second, the two important Muslim places of worship - Mecca and Medina, were under his control. Husein ibn Ali al-Hashimi together with his four sons led the great Arab rebellion against the Ottoman rule in 1916, which played an important role in the fall of the Ottoman Empire and liberation of Arabs from the Ottoman domination<sup>9</sup>.

In his addresses of 1916-1917 to the Muslim world, Husein ibn Ali al-Hashimi strictly criticized the Young Turks party and Talat, Enver and Cemal, the rulers of the empire, who, he believed pursued a wrong policy<sup>10</sup>. He sharply criticized their policy towards Arabs and other non-Turkish peoples of the empire, including Armenians. In this respect he points out three circumstances: a) the attempts of the Young Turks to convert into Turkish all the nations of the empire; b) their hostile attitude towards Arabs and Arabic, which was the language of the Koran, the sacred book of Muslims, and c) mass slaughter of Armenians during the World War I (1914-1918). According to the Sheriff of Mecca Husein ibn Ali al-Hashimi, the Young Turks' policy contradicted the principle of Islam and they "broke off with the Islamic world, the Holy Koran and the

<sup>8</sup> This is an Arabic term which literally means "people under wardship", under the protection. It covered non-Islamic peoples of other religions, who had their own sacred book and were called "Ahl-al-kitabi"- "People of the Book." To them belonged the Christians: Armenians, Greeks, Syrians who had their own sacred book- Holy Bible; the Jews, whose sacred book is the Torah and the Zoroastrians, whose sacred book is the Avesta. According to the Zimmi status, "Peoples of the Book" were permitted to live in Islamic lands and countries, had the right to maintain and confess their own religion, guaranteed were their lives, inviolability of their property, protection of their holy places, to have their churches and synagogues and the right to conduct religious services. The forcible Islamization of "People of the Book" was forbidden. "The People of the Book" were subject to their own religious leaders, to the jurisdiction of their patriarchs and catholicoses. In other words the Islamic State and Koran protected them, and infringement of their rights, the more so - murder of zimmi, a ward, based on ethnic - religious distinction, was considered impermissible. In return for all of this, the "People of the Book" had to pay a head tax called the Jizya (Академия наук СССР. Институт востоковедения, Ислам. Краткий справочник, Москва, 1983, с. 37).

<sup>9</sup> Hovhannisyan N., Arab Historiography on the Armenian Genocide, Yerevan, 2005, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> "Manshur ham min sharif Mekka va amiruha ilajamii ikhvanihi al-muslimin. 1916 huzeiran 26. "Masadir al-Arabiya Hawla Jarima Ibadati al Arman. (A Common Appeal of the Sheriff of Mecca and its Governor to all Muslim Brothers, July 26, 1916. The Arabic Sources About the Armenian Genocide)", Beirut, 1988, pp. 11-19 (in Arabic).

Sunnah"<sup>11</sup>. Husein ibn Ali, taking into account the Young Turks' hostile position towards the Arabs, their hanging of Arab patriot leaders in Damascus, Beirut and Aley in 1915-1916 by order of the Young Turks' leader Cemal, in his two letters to all of the most famous Islam leaders of the world, stated: "The Young Turks' policy have nothing in common with Islam and Islamic virtues"<sup>12</sup>. Husein ibn Ali drew such conclusions also because of the Young Turks' policy towards the Armenian Question. Learning of the Armenian Genocide, he wrote a special letter in 1916 to the commanders of the Arab rebel army on the Syrian battle front, his son Emir Feisal and Emir Abd al Aziz al Jarba, and ordered them to offer every type of aid to the Armenian refugees and "protect them just as you would protect your own selves, your children and your property, because they (the Armenians-N.H.) are the Moslems' zimmi"<sup>13</sup>.

The Zimmi status has also been violated by the post-Ottomans, including today's Turkey, which has been witnessed in recent times by the murders of the well known Armenian popular activist Hrant Dink and an Armenian officer in the Turkish army, the high ranking Greek Orthodox and Catholic clergy and other similar crimes.

In Arab historiography the opinion has been confirmed that Arab Islam differs from Turkish Islam. Arab Islam is faithful to the fundamental principles of Islam, is tolerant to believers of other religions, and stands for the defense of the zimmi rights, while "Turkish Islam" is defined as intolerant and violent. And thus, thanks to the humanitarian attitude of the Arabs, the Armenian communities were formed in the Middle East.

This new Armenian diaspora passed through three stages of development. The first stage embraced 1920-1945, which we call the "Stage of Formation of the Armenian Diaspora". The Armenians, taking advantage of the kind attitude of the Arab people and Arab authorities, created their own national sub-community structures and progressed from refugee status to become citizens of Arab nations. The Arab countries became for the Armenians the second motherland. Arab leaders have greatly appreciated the conduct and activity of Armenians. In 1943 the first president of independent Syria, Shuqri al-Quwatli (1943-1949, 1955-1958), appreciating very highly the valuable contribution of the Armenian community in the struggle for independence of Syria and Lebanon, announced: "Our respect and confidence towards the Armenians has the power of conviction. The Armenians of Syria have the same rights as the Arabs of Syria. If some day someone wants to trample over the rights of Armenians in Syria and Lebanon, I will prevent that even with my own blood if necessary"<sup>14</sup>. The attitude of Armenians towards the national problems of Lebanon and in particular their participation in the national-liberation movement for the independence of Lebanon, were highly

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See. Hovhannisyan N., History of the Arab Countries. (VII century-2005), vol. II, Period of Ottoman Domination. 1516-1918, Yerevan, 2004, p. 565.

<sup>14</sup> «Ժողովուրդի Ձայն», Բեյրութ, 11 դեկտեմբերի 1943 թ.:

appreciated also by the leaders of Lebanon. The first president of independent Lebanon Bishara al-Khury (1943-1952) during a meeting (December 1943) with the leaders of the Armenian community of Lebanon, in his address to the Armenians, stated that "The Armenians are faithful and devoted to Lebanon, to its people and Constitution. The Armenian community of Lebanon is an indivisible part of the Lebanese people"<sup>15</sup>.

The second stage is that of the "Strengthening of Armenian Communities and the Advancement of their Roles in the State, Public-Political and Economic Life of Arab Nations", which took place for about a quarter century, from the beginning of 1946 to the beginning of 1970. During this stage the number of Armenians in the Near and Middle East, including Iran, grew to almost 800,000. Armenians became members of parliaments, ministers, government cabinet officials, army generals, and made up part of the establishment of Arab nations. Syria and Lebanon became centers of the Armenian Diaspora.

The third stage we call "The Stage of the Gradual Weakening of Middle Eastern Armenian Communities and Attempts to Remove Them," which began in the beginning of the 1970s and continues until today. This is the result, first and foremost, of external intervention, though we cannot neglect certain internal circumstances too. It was the period of the Cold War between West and East, which strongly reflected also in the Near East, the period of struggle and confrontation between the USA (and its allies, particularly Israel and Turkey) and the USSR (which had influence in some Arab countries). The Armenian communities in the Arab countries sometimes had been considered by the West as complimentary supporters and defenders of the Soviet influence. However, it is necessary to stress that the Armenian communities' sympathies were not for the Soviet Union, but for Soviet Armenia. Anyhow, Armenian communities have suffered greatly in the confrontation and wars in the Near East. The civil war in Lebanon (1975-1989) brought chaos to this once flourishing nation. This resulted in horrible numbers of emigrants from Lebanon, which included along with Arabs also Lebanese Armenians. In order to facilitate the emigration and with the purpose of spurring the emigration of Arabs and Armenians the USA eased the granting of entry visas.

Approximately 200,000 Armenians left Lebanon while 35,000-40,000 remained. Lebanon ceased to be the center of the Armenian Diaspora. This also weakened the Syrian Armenian community. It is necessary to stress that Turkey had the most interest in the emigration of Armenians from Arab lands and the liquidation of Armenian communities. The immediate descendants of the victims of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenians of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine had been settled close to Western Armenia which had been seized by Turkey. Armenians remember the horrors of the genocide and legally demand that Turkey not only recognize the Armenian Genocide, but also return their native land - Western Armenia. The Armenian and other

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<sup>15</sup> See Hovhannisyan N., *National-Liberation Struggle in Lebanon (1939-1945)*, Yerevan, 1967, p. 135 (in Armenian).

Christian communities received a second blow during the Iraq War<sup>16</sup>. Politically speaking, Iraq fell into an abyss from which it has not been able to come out until today. Terrorism has become an everyday phenomenon of Iraqi life, the Sunnis and the Shias kill and murder each other. This terrible environment has weighed heavily on the Armenians and the other Christian communities of Iraq, who have greatly suffered from terrorism, murders, threats, and various acts of violence inflicted on them. The Armenian and other Christian communities have been dissolved. They have been forced to leave Iraq and find refuge in other countries. The Christian population today has greatly decreased in Iraq and they have lost their former important role. This is a great loss for the entire Christian world. It must be pointed out that until this situation came about the leaders of republican Iraq had a favorable disposition towards Christians, among whom were the Armenians. I have met and spoken with Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, who was president of Iraq in 1968-1979. During our conversation he mentioned that "They are very content with the Iraqi Armenians. They are very noble, trustworthy people, and lawful citizens of Iraq. He would by all possible means protect the Armenians and not allow their rights to be trampled upon".

Now let us reflect on the Armenian community of Syria in the context of Syrian history. Syria has always had an exceptional role in the Arab world. On one occasion the Pan-Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser said that "If Egypt is the head of the Arab world, then Syria is its beating heart of it." After the defeat in the First World War, in October 1919 Mustafa Kemal called on the Syrians to unite with the Turks and as a united force fight against the European nations, stressing "We desire, despite Wilson's principles, to unite those parts, which belong to Turkey"<sup>17</sup>. Kemal aspired to reestablish Turkish domination over Syria, however the Syrians were not deceived and they rejected Kemal's proposals.

But Turkey in 1937-1939 with French approval and English support annexed the Sanjak of Alexandretta in 1939<sup>18</sup>. This was a great tragedy for the main residents of Sanjak, the Arabs and Armenians. The Armenians, not desiring to again be placed under Turkish domination, deserted the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The Arabs acted in the same way. 70,000 Armenians and Arabs immigrated mainly to Lebanon. In June 1941, Turkey, taking advantage of the situation created by the World War II addressed to the leadership of Nazi Germany to allow Turkey to put its control over the Berlin-Baghdad-Basra railway, to seize all of Syria and Iraq's Mosul province, under the pretext to anticipate a possible English aggression and occupation of the mentioned territories. Turkey promised Germany that after the war they would return all of these with the

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<sup>16</sup> A protracted armed conflict that began with the 2003 invasion of Iraq led by the US (James P. Pfiffner, *US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army*. – Intelligence and National Security Vol. 25, No. 1, February 2010, pp. 76–85). <http://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/CPA%20Orders,%20Iraq%20PDF.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> "Documents on British Foreign Policy. 1919-1939", First Series, vol. IV. London, 1952, p. 568.

<sup>18</sup> See Բայրամյան Ա., Ալեքսանդրետի սանջաքի հարցը և միջազգային դիվանագիտությունը (1936-1939 թթ.), Երևան, 1998:

exception of the province of Aleppo to France<sup>19</sup>. We must note that Aleppo was the center of the Syrian Armenians, while Mosul was one of the centers of Iraqi Armenians. It is clear that the occupation of those regions of Syria and Iraq by Turkey would represent a deadly danger for the existence of the Armenian communities and could open a new page of the Armenian Genocide by the successors of the Ottoman Turks. But Turkey could not reach its plans in relation to Syria<sup>20</sup>. Since then Turkey has not given up the idea of annexing or subjugating Syria, however, it has never succeeded.

The situation surrounding Syria became tense and threatening when Hafez al-Assad took over rule in 1970. This was viewed as a transfer of power to the Alawi clan against whom opposed not only the Sunni majority of the people of Syria, but also neighboring countries where the power belongs to Sunnis, among them the Arab countries headed by Saudi Arabia, as well as Turkey. They have an abhorrence toward the Alawis and do not even consider them to be Moslems. Hafez al-Assad and his son and successor Bashar al-Assad successfully confronted the opposition and it was in this that their correct policy played a positive role for the ethnic and religious minorities of Syria, among which were the Armenians, who supported the Syrian administration. I have met with both Presidents Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad. During our conversations we have discussed their policies towards the Armenians and other minorities in Syria. They greatly appreciated the role of Armenians in the internal political life of Syria, especially their efforts for establishing stability. Both father and son were committed to the defence and respect of their rights. The anti-Syrian internal forces supported by external powers, taking advantage of the 2011 Arab revolutions, commenced hostilities against Syria and have unleashed a civil war there up to the present, aiming to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad's government. There are various Islamic organizations including Al-Qaieda, Ikhwān al-Muslimūn - the Moslem Brothers, various Islamic fronts, groups, Turkish, Azeri and other mercenaries and criminal types participating in the hostilities against the Syrian administration. Turkey is playing a very negative role in the Syrian events, dreaming to become the Middle Eastern superpower and achieve its neo-Ottoman goals. Many of the forces that are fighting against the legitimate Syrian government are entering Syria from Turkey whose borders are open to them. Syria has appeared in a very complicated situation, the country is ruined, the cities and village dwellings are destroyed, the loss of human life is great, and many Syrians have emigrated. In this chaos Turkey aspires to solve one of its chief goals: to finish off once and for all the Syrian Armenian community which is in its immediate vicinity and whose center is Aleppo. In the latest period the anti-Syrian war actions directed from Turkey have been focused on the Armenian quarters of Aleppo, demolishing their homes, churches, schools, cultural centers and workplaces. Armenian-populated Nor Gyugh district in Aleppo and other Armenian-populated areas

<sup>19</sup> "Documents on German Foreign Policy. 1918-1945. Series D (1937-1945)", vol. XIII, London, 1954, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> The Foreign Ministry to the Embassy in Turkey, 12, VII, 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy. 1918-1945. Series D (1937-1945)", vol. XIII, p. 123.

have been bombarded and leveled to the ground. The people are compelled to leave the country. Already approximately 25,000 Aleppo Armenians have emigrated, of which 15,000 have come to the Republic of Armenia. In March of 2014 Kessab, an Armenian village was rid of its Armenian population. "Eyewitnesses in Lattakia and in Turkey reported that 50 - 90 residents were massacred, others were deported against their will, across the border into Turkey, while a large number fled to the coastal city of Lattakia... In mid-April, the Syrian Arab Army regained control over the strategically important mountain known as "Tsalma", overseeing Kessab"<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, Turkey is close to the realization of one of its chief goals: the complete removal of Armenians from Syria. They want to drive Armenians completely out of Syria, where now only some 35,000-40,000 Armenians remain, many Armenian churches, schools and houses are destroyed. "In Deir ez-Zor, that remains under control of ISIS the militants blew up an Armenian church, desecrating the remains of the victims of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century".<sup>22</sup> At present a new phase started in the Syrian conflict. Over the last year a U.S.-led coalition launched airstrikes against the ISIS in Syria At the request of the Syrian government and in cooperation with its forces from September 2015 the Russian Federation also has launched air strikes coordinated by the Syrian ground forces against the ISIS.

Thus, during last decades the Armenian communities in the Middle East have been considerably weakened. We cannot forget that communities cut off from their native lands, who now live in ethnically and religiously different environments, do not have a future. Their future is assimilation. The world's experiment has proven this. At least 15,000 Armenians have repatriated to the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh since the start of the civil war in 2011, in Syria, mostly descendants of Armenians who formerly lived in their Motherland - Western Armenia and during the Armenian Genocide were deported to Syria<sup>23</sup>.

The Armenian Diaspora's future is connected with the prosperity of the Republic of Armenia and the Artsakh Republic and realization of the idea of restoring the might and territorial integrity of the Motherland.

<sup>21</sup> <http://nsnbc.me/2014/06/15/syrian-army-liberates-armenian-town-kessab-two-months-occupation/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://news.am/eng/news/230808.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://beta.trtworld.com/mea/armenia-receives-15000-syrian-armenian-refugees-7668>

<https://f.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2114/files/2015/05/Conference-Program-150338.pdf>