

Armenians in the Midst of Civil Wars: Lebanon and Syria Compared ^(*)

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Since March 2011, Syria has been the arena of a vicious civil war, in which numerous world and regional powers have also become deeply involved. The long-term existence of the deep-rooted Armenian communities in various parts of Syria has also come under question because of this protracted conflict. An unmistakable feeling of deep unease and anxiety is evident among most Armenians worldwide as fighting persists and no peaceful settlement appears to be in sight.

The Syrian conflict follows another long-drawn-out civil war in next-door Lebanon, which went on for fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990. The Armenian community in Lebanon also suffered gravely during this conflict. However, the general view prevailing among Armenians today, both in Lebanon and abroad, is that the amount of Armenian losses and torment during the Lebanese Civil War was mitigated because of the policy of ‘positive neutrality,’ which the various religious and political components of the Armenian community in Lebanon unfailingly practiced during the decade-and-a-half of bloodshed and destruction.

In the past four years many Armenians have frequently asked why their ethnic kin in Syria have failed to openly proclaim a similar community-wide policy of neutrality in the current conflict and pursue it effectively. This article will attempt to provide a tentative answer to this oft-raised question, based on the comparison of the challenges which Armenians in Lebanon faced during the early stages of their country’s civil war, with the difficulties now confronting the Armenians in Syria. The preliminary conclusion offered at this juncture is that Armenians in Syria in 2011 set off from a more unfavorable point of departure compared to their ethnic kin in Lebanon back

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in 1975. It must be kept in mind, however, that the Lebanese Civil War ended twenty-five years ago. The Armenian position during that conflict can now be studied based on published primary sources, including testimonies by Armenian and non-Armenian protagonists, and a growing body of academic literature. The Syrian crisis, on the other hand, is still unfolding, and its outcome is still hard to predict. Observers therefore lack at this stage a historical perspective. Moreover, most Armenians from Syria, including those consulted directly or indirectly during the research leading to this article, are still reluctant to go on the record, fearing, understandably, that the facts or interpretations which they will disclose may simply fall into the wrong hands of different zealous warlords or their respective followers. Therefore, the arguments and findings of this article may be subject to modification in the future. A more comprehensive comparison will, in all likelihood, be necessary once the Syrian conflict is over, at least to refine the conclusions of this article, if not more.

Throughout recorded history, Armenians, living in their cradle, the Armenian Highland, and, from the eleventh century A.D., also in Cilicia, have had numerous political, religious, cultural and trade connections with the peoples and successive states governments on the territory of their southern neighbor, Natural or Geographical Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*). Medieval Armenian sources called this area *Asorik*, which, at various times, also hosted important Armenian expatriate communities.¹

This area received additional significance for Armenians immediately after the First World War, when tens of thousands of genocide survivors from the Ottoman Empire sought refuge in the nascent French mandates of Lebanon and Syria. Lebanon's international borders were set in 1920. By 1928 the Armenian Orthodox Prelacy estimated that 32,859 Armenians were living in

¹ For histories of the various Armenian communities on the territory of modern Lebanon and Syria prior to the First World War, see Rev. Mesrop Terzian, *Zmmaru hay vanke 1749-1949* [The Armenian Monastery of Bzommar] (Beirut, 1949); Archbishop Artavazd Siurmeyan, *Patmutiun Halepi hayots* [History of Armenians in Aleppo], 3 vols. (Aleppo, Beirut and Paris, 1940-1950; second printing of vols. I-II: Aleppo, 2002-2003); Sisak Varzhapetian, *Hayere Libanani mej* [Armenians in Lebanon], vol. I (Beirut, 1951; second printing, 1982); Pierre Atamian, *Histoire de la communauté arménienne catholique de Damas* (Beirut, 1964); Avedis K. Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge, MA, 1965); Mesrob K. Krikorian, *Armenians in the Service of the Ottoman Empire 1860-1908* (London, 1978), pp. 80-101; H. Kh. Topuzyan, *Siriayi ev Libanani haykakan gaghtojakhneri patmutyun (1841-1946)* [O. Kh. Topuzian, *Istoriia armianskikh kolonii Sirii i Livana (1841-1946)*] (Erevan, 1986), pp. 7-152; Hakob Cholakian, *Kesap*, 3 vols. (Aleppo, 1995-2004); idem., *Antioki merdzaka Ruji hoviti hayere* [The Armenians of Rouj Valley near Antioch] (Antelias, 2006).

the country.² According to the 1932 census, Armenians constituted about 4.5 percent of Lebanon's total population of 782,415. In 1944, only months after Lebanon had gained independence from France, this proportion had risen to over 6 percent,³ partly as a result of a new wave of Armenian immigration to Lebanon after the French mandatory authorities had transferred the *sanjak* of Alexandretta (Hatay) from Syria to Turkey in 1938-1939.⁴ On the other hand, Syria attained her currently recognized international borders only on the eve of World War II. The country's civil register showed that around 100,000 Armenians lived within those boundaries in 1938.⁵ Seven years later, in 1945, when Syria had also just become independent from France, Armenians formed over 4 percent of the country's total population of about 3 million.⁶

Under the French mandate in the 1920s and 1930s, the constitutions of both Syria and Lebanon accorded the various ethno-religious communities (including the three Armenian denominations – Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical) sole jurisdiction on all matters of personal status. They also acquired the right to teach in their native language and to establish and maintain their communal schools. Moreover, the political systems of these two countries were both based on equitable ethno-religious representation in the legislature and other branches of government. In his noteworthy comparative study of Armenians in modern Syria and Lebanon, Nicola Migliorino argues that

² A. Atan, 'Hay keanke (Amsakan tesutian)' [Armenian Life (Monthly Review)], *Hayrenik* monthly, vol. 6, no. 10 (August 1928), pp. 175-176; 'Surio ev Libanani hayots vichakagrutiune' [Statistics on the Armenians of Syria and Lebanon], in E. A. Voskerichian (comp.), *Suriakan alpom (grakan bazhinov)* [Syrian Album (with a Literary Section)], vol. 3, (Aleppo, 1929), p. 111.

³ A. H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), pp. 385-386.

⁴ On the Armenian exodus from the *sanjak* of Alexandretta in 1938-1939, see Isabelle Mavian, 'La communauté arménienne de la région de Kessab à l'époque du Mandat Français sur la Syrie (1918-1940),' unpublished masters dissertation, Paris I-Sorbonne, France, 1993-1994, pp. 108-154; Raymond H. Kévorkian and Vahé Tachjian (eds.), *The Armenian General Benevolent Union: One Hundred Years of History*, Vol. I, 1906-1940, translated from the French by G.M. Goshgarian (Cairo, Paris and New York, 2006), pp. 263-265; Michel Paboudjian, 'Du Moussa Dagħ à Anjar: Le "recasement" des Arméniens,' in Raymond Kévorkian, Lévon Norduigian, Vahé Tachjian (eds.), *Les Arméniens 1917-1939. La quête d'un refuge*, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 2007), pp. 267-297. The topic is also covered in Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Musa Dagħ Armenians: A Socioeconomic and Cultural History, 1919-1939* (Beirut, forthcoming).

⁵ Thomas Hugh Green Shields, 'The Settlement of Armenian Refugees in Syria and Lebanon, 1915-1939,' unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 1978, pp. 135-147. However, Green Shields underlines that there is specific mention in the official sources he has relied upon that the Armenian total presented for Damascus, Syria's capital, was too high; see, *ibid*, p. 135.

⁶ Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1987), p. 15.

the political system established by the Mandate authorities, created remarkable opportunities for the (re)construction of a new, post-Genocide Armenian world in the Levant: on the one hand, it maintained the principle of official recognition of specific cultural autonomies that had characterized the Ottoman tradition; on the other, it created constitutional spaces and political conditions for the integration of the Armenians into the Lebanese and Syrian parliamentary systems. The Armenian refugees ... were able to seize those opportunities and to gradually develop a vast system of Armenian institutions that became the backbone of the Armenian effort for cultural preservation and development.⁷

However, following the French withdrawal at the end of the Second World War, the independent states of Lebanon and Syria followed different paths of political and economic development. Predictably, this divergence also affected their respective Armenian communities. The established consociational power sharing political system was consolidated in Lebanon,⁸ and the role of the central government remained limited. Conversely, the successive centralizing governments in Syria gradually dismantled the ethno-religious representation system and imposed, in the name of Arab nationalism, political and cultural restrictions on ethnic minorities, including measures affecting Armenian schools and communal organizations. Writing before the current Syrian Civil War, Migliorino contended that

the evolution of the two states, and in particular their approach towards ethno-cultural diversity, had a significant influence on the way the Armenian communities have evolved and, ultimately, on the comparative success of the preservation of their diverse identity.⁹

This article will take this argument further and contend that these differences in the political systems of the two countries were also vital in shaping the courses of action pursued by Armenian community leaders when Lebanon and Syria successively became engulfed in their respective civil wars.

⁷ Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (New York and Oxford, 2008), p. 221. The mandate period is studied in the second chapter of Migliorino's work, pp. 45-87.

⁸ Arend Lijphart, the leading authority on consociational political systems, defines the latter as "government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy." He identifies four primary characteristics of such systems: (a) the government is composed of a coalition of leaders that represent the various factions of these plural society; (b) these leaders have a mutual veto over the other leaders' decisions; (c) political factions are represented proportionally; and (d) each political faction retains a high degree of autonomy; see Rola el-Husseini, *Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon* (Syracuse, New York, 2012), pp. 2-3.

The fifteen-year-long Lebanese Civil War caused massive casualties and destruction, in addition to a huge wave of permanent emigration from the country. The nature of the conflict, the list of warring factions, and their political-military alliances with other local groups and outside powers underwent numerous changes during those fifteen years.¹⁰ This article will focus, however, on the first phase of this conflict, the so called Two Years' War of 1975-1976. The Armenian political leadership's decision not to get militarily involved in the conflict was made and first practiced at this juncture, even if the same policy was pursued with equal steadfastness during the later stages of the war as well.

The Two Years' War pitted an almost exclusively Christian and largely pro-*status quo* coalition of various political parties and factions against a heterogeneous, radical opposition camp, with four foci – Lebanese Muslim, pan-Arab nationalist, Lebanese leftist and Palestinian.

The Christians of Lebanon and especially the Maronites, the largest ethno-religious group among them, fought to maintain their dominant position in the country's political, social and economic order. They argued that the constitutional privileges they enjoyed, even after having become a numerical minority in the country's population, were their only guarantee against any future attempt by the Muslim majority to have them marginalized. The Christian pro-*status quo* factions also opposed the armed presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon because the latter's growing involvement in the country's politics was evidently altering the delicate balance of power among the various ethno-religious communities in favor of the Muslims.

The opposing camp fought to alter Lebanon's constitution and curb traditional Maronite, right-wing dominance. It also supported the Palestinians' right to pursue their liberation struggle against Israel from Lebanese territory. These pro-Palestinian sympathies among the various components of the opposition emanated not only from pan-Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist

⁹ Migliorino, *(Re)constructing*, p. 221.

¹⁰ There is extensive secondary literature on the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990, including Kamal S. Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (Delmar, New York, 1976); Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for*

convictions, but also from practical considerations. Many in the opposition camp viewed the Palestinian guerrillas present in Lebanon as a substitute ‘Muslim’ or ‘revolutionary’ army vis-à-vis the primarily Maronite-led and pro-*status quo* official Lebanese army.

Palestinian military involvement in Lebanese political disputes went back only to the late 1960s. However, Lebanon had already witnessed an earlier six-month-long armed insurrection by an *ad hoc* Muslim, pan-Arab nationalist and leftist coalition against a Maronite-dominated and pro-western government.¹¹ This showdown in 1958 had coincided with the height of the Armenian ‘Cold War’ in the Diaspora. Deeply divided on what attitude to take vis-à-vis Soviet rule in the Armenian homeland, the three political parties active in the Diaspora had coalesced into two rival camps, intent on one another’s ideological destruction. Throughout the 1950s, the Dashnak Party saw itself resolutely within the Western Camp in the latter’s global struggle against Communism. Meanwhile, its traditional rivals, the Hunchakian and Ramkavar parties were sympathetic to the Soviets. Within the Lebanese context of 1958, the Dashnaks backed the government, while the Hunchakians, Ramkavars and Armenian members of the Lebanese Communist Party were supportive of the opposition. The breakdown of law and order across the country unleashed the accumulated animosity among the rival Armenian camps, and a series of tit-for-tat assassinations took the lives of around 35 Armenians of opposing political persuasions. This bloodshed stopped only when the broader Lebanese conflict came to an end and the post-war national unity government compelled the Armenian parties to declare a halt.¹²

Between 1958 and 1975, however, Armenian Diasporan politics had altered considerably, and the three parties had ceased seeking external, non-Armenian allies to weaken or ideologically liquidate their Armenian rivals. Demands for the international recognition and condemnation of the World War I Armenian Genocide and irredentist territorial demands from Turkey – issues

Lebanon, 1970-1985, revised edition (Ithaca and London, 1985); Tabitha Petran, *The Struggle over Lebanon* (New York, 1987); Farid el Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967-1976* (London and New York, 2000).

¹¹ For historical analyses of the Lebanese Civil of 1958, see Fahim Qubain, *Crisis in Lebanon* (Washington, DC, 1961); M. S. Agwani (ed.), *The Lebanese Crisis, 1958: A Documentary Study* (London, 1965); Caroline Attié, *Struggle in the Levant: Lebanon in the 1950s* (London and New York, 2004); Claude Boueiz Kanaan, *Lebanon 1860-1960: A Century of Myth and Politics* (London, 2005); Irene L. Gendzier, *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945-1958*, With a New Preface (New York, 2006).

¹² For details, see Seta Kalpakian, ‘The Dimensions of the 1958 Inter-Communal Conflict in the Armenian Community in Lebanon,’ unpublished M.A. thesis, American University of Beirut, 1983.

which the three parties agreed upon – were now accorded precedence to previously overriding divisions concerning the legitimacy of Soviet rule in the homeland. Indeed, the three parties were holding meetings in Beirut to plan the joint, Diaspora-wide commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the genocide when the Lebanese Civil War broke out. These meetings were immediately used to also formulate a unified Armenian stance vis-à-vis the immediate crisis in the host country.

The Armenian community in Lebanon itself was still growing steadily in 1975. In the early 1970s, this community was estimated to be in excess of 165,000, perhaps as much as 200,000 people. These approximations included a few thousand refugees from Palestine after 1948 and a much larger number of more recent migrants from Syria – two sub-groups which did not yet have Lebanese citizenship.¹³ Moreover, with the eclipse of the Armenian community in Egypt following the revolution of 1952, Beirut had become the uncontested unofficial ‘capital city’ of the Armenian Diaspora in terms of its political leadership and cultural production. The three Diasporan parties had moved their headquarters to Beirut and were very much aware that any decision they would take as regards the situation in Lebanon would have repercussions among all Armenian communities outside the Soviet Bloc.

A few of the Armenian community leaders, who formulated and implemented the policy of ‘positive neutrality’ during the civil war, published their testimonies after the end of the conflict. They all maintain that the adoption of this policy proved to be a wise, circumspect and correct decision. This conclusion is today shared by almost all Armenian community activists in Lebanon, and by ethnic Armenian scholars who have studied this policy as an academic subject.¹⁴ The bloody Lebanese Civil War ultimately failed to resolve the core issues, which had

¹³ For various estimates, see Social Action Committee of the Armenian Evangelical Union, *A Survey of the Social Problems and Needs Within the Armenian Community in Lebanon* (Beirut, 1970), p. 30, as quoted in Migliorino, *(Re)constructing*, p. 173, endnote 2; Harry Corbin, Kathryn Griffith and Assad Rahhal, ‘Observations on the Armenians in Lebanon Made in 1970-1973,’ *Armenian Review*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Winter 1975-76), p. 392; ‘Zekuyts Libanani Temi gortsuneutian masin (kaghuats nerkayatsuats teghegakren) (1974-1978)’ [Communication on the Activities of the Diocese of Lebanon (Excerpts from the Report Presented)], *Hask*, vol. 47, nos. 4-6 (April-May-June 1978), p. 298.

¹⁴ See, for example, Ohannes Geukjian, ‘The Policy of Positive Neutrality of the Armenian Political Parties in Lebanon during the Civil War, 1975-90: A Critical Analysis,’ *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 65-73; Roupen Avsharian, ‘The *Ta’ef* Agreement and the Lebanese-Armenians,’ in Aïda Boudjikianian (ed.), *Armenians of Lebanon: From Past Princesses and Refugees to Present-Day Community* (Beirut, 2009), pp.

caused it in the first place. No clear winner emerged to impose its version of who were the heroes and villains of this conflict. Therefore, the Armenians' reluctance to wage war and, hence, their lack of any responsibility for the massive killings and destruction now appear as the morally good position. Moreover, Armenians fondly remember today that, during the war years, they were among the few in Lebanon who could safely cross the lines dividing the various warring factions, and that their policy of 'positive neutrality' minimized the casualties and material losses suffered by the community.

No single document was drafted in 1975 outlining the basic Armenian position as regards the conflict. Instead, the Armenian party leaders agreed upon a set of principles, which they and the Armenian deputies in the country's parliament later expounded in the Armenian media and to the wider Lebanese public. Their efforts were successful especially among the Armenian rank and file; very few Armenian youth chose to fight as individuals alongside either the pro-*status quo* Christian or the opposition leftist militiamen. The phrase 'positive neutrality,' which came to describe this policy, was reportedly first coined by Harutiun Kuzhuni (Cherechian), the Hunchakian Party leader.¹⁵

In broad terms, the policy of 'positive neutrality' emanated from the Armenian community's commitment to Lebanon's national unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and consociational political system. The Armenian parties recognized the need for certain social, economic and administrative reforms so as to resolve the contested issues within Lebanese society. However, they insisted that such reforms should be agreed upon through dialogue. Therefore, they eschewed and condemned the use of force as a means to solve political disputes in Lebanon. They also pursued active communication and negotiation with all other segments of Lebanese society. Nevertheless, the Armenian parties also armed their youth – following similar measures by other

386-408; Vera Choulhadjian Yacoubian, 'The Politics of the Armenians in Lebanon: 1975-1989,' unpublished M.A. thesis, Lebanese American University, 2013.

¹⁵ V. Avagian (ed.), *Hayutian ev Libanani hamar: Hayahots tagheru inknapashtpanutian 25amiak* [For Armenians and Lebanon: The 25th Anniversary of the Self-Defense of Armenian-Populated Quarters] (Beirut, 2000), pp. 27-28, 34, 106-107; Pepo Simonian (ed.), *Libanahayutian ghekavari tiparneren Harutiun Kuzhuni* [An Archetype of the Lebanese-Armenian Leader: Harutiun Kuzhuni] (Beirut, 2002), pp. 13, 253; Melgon Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen khorhrdaran...* [From a Refugee Camp to Parliament...], vol. II (Aleppo, 2005), pp. 47-48; Pepo Simonian and Zhirayr Danielian (eds.), *Vahrich Cherechian: Keankin ev mtatsoghutian endmejen* [Vahrij Jerejian Through His Life and Thought] (Beirut, 2007), pp. 203-211, 220-226.

communities and political factions. The activities of these young Armenian armed men would remain confined, however, to defending the Armenian-inhabited quarters and institutions against possible encroachments by other militia groups.¹⁶

The Armenian political elite's decision to opt for 'positive neutrality' emanated both from the conviction that Lebanon's existing political system was advantageous to the Armenian community overall, and from the three parties' desire to deepen their growing cooperation across the Diaspora since the 1960s.

The Armenian political leadership was convinced that Lebanon's consociational system had accorded the Armenian community certain latitude to control its internal affairs and helped preserve ethnic Armenian identity and culture. After all, the declared objective of the three parties remained the maintenance of a distinct Armenian ethnic and political identity in the Diaspora until a more favorable international political environment would permit their return to their historical homeland, now under Turkish rule. Moreover, under Lebanon's constitution, the relatively small Armenian community regularly had representatives in the country's main political institutions and thus played some role in the host state's national politics. Armenian leaders feared that if the deepening crisis led to Lebanon's partition, or if the political system was altered fundamentally, their community could lose many of the political and cultural rights it had come to enjoy.

On the Armenian Diasporan level, the leadership based in Lebanon was aware that if a unified position was not adopted and managed carefully, age-old, but recently dormant rivalries could be exploited by outside forces, and the specter of the so called 'fratricidal' killings of 1958 could haunt the community again. Moreover, because of Beirut's centrality in the Diaspora, the inability to forge a common stand vis-à-vis the conflict in Lebanon may also slow down and even halt the gradually burgeoning Armenian cross-party cooperation in other parts of the world.

Finally, the published testimonies of these Armenian leaders attest that they also took into consideration the intense involvement of foreign, especially other Arab, powers in the Lebanese

¹⁶ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 16-18, 34-35; Simonian and Danielian, *Vahrach Cherechian*, pp. 212, 216.

Civil War. Any unwise step by them might endanger those Armenians in Lebanon who had Syrian citizenship or were refugees from Palestine. It might even arouse complications for the Armenian communities in other Arab countries, like Syria, Iraq, Egypt or Jordan.¹⁷

However, any minor actor proclaiming its neutrality during a broader conflict involving other, more powerful actors, should also have the means to make the other players respect its neutrality.¹⁸ For that reason, the Armenian parties maintained continual contact with all warring sides, including the Palestinians and Syria, whose troops entered Lebanon in 1976. These deliberations were meant to clarify the specifics of the joint Armenian position to the other actors. As mentioned earlier, the Armenians also maintained, wherever possible, small military forces for the purpose of self-defense. Moreover, as the Lebanese state institutions providing various services to the populace gradually withered away, the Armenian parties and their social and educational affiliates, together with other Armenian religious and charity organizations, had to step in and fill the void, thus increasing Armenian communal self-government under the war conditions.¹⁹

Nevertheless, these measures could not have been enough by themselves to maintain the Armenian neutral position had a number of other, internal and external political factors been absent from the broader Lebanese scene. The importance of these specific conditions becomes apparent if the political landscape in and around Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 is compared with the local and international state of affairs affecting Syria since 2011.

First, the Lebanese state structure survived throughout the war period, even if the central government lost control of many of the state institutions, as well as its traditionally shaky monopoly on violence. Even under these conditions of its precarious survival, the legitimacy of the Lebanese central government and institutions were respected on the international scene. The parliament elected in 1972 repeatedly prolonged its mandate and sat for twenty years, electing during this period five successive presidents of the republic. These presidents and the national

¹⁷ Avagian, *Hayutian*, p. 38.

¹⁸ This argument is made convincingly in Eruand Bampukian, a prominent member of the Dashnak Party, in Avagian, *Hayutian*, p. 18.

¹⁹ This practice was also followed by other ethno-religious communities across the country.

army did not always participate actively in the civil war; at times they were ‘above’ the conflict, like an arbiter trying to bring the warring factions together. There was no conscription in the country, and Armenian youth were not under obligation to report for compulsory military service. The national flag and anthem were still revered by most warring factions. Therefore, Armenians could still claim allegiance to the country’s symbols and elected leaders, but also assert neutrality as regards the ongoing conflict among the numerous Lebanese and non-Lebanese warring factions.

Secondly, besides the Armenian community, there were other Lebanese factions, who also refused to take up arms, but remained involved in the parallel process of political bargaining. Armenians could thus point to the existence of these factions and argue that some non-Armenian Lebanese also shared their standpoint vis-à-vis the ongoing conflict.

Many Armenians in Lebanon remain convinced that their policy of ‘positive neutrality’ was also favored by key international players like the United States, the Soviet Union and the Vatican. Armenians in those countries are believed to have been instrumental in explaining the Armenian position in Lebanon to their respective host governments. No such argument is made, however, in the published testimonies of Lebanese-Armenian political leaders from that period. Some four decades after the outbreak of the conflict, it is surprising that no researcher has yet delved into the declassified files of any of these governments so as to see if this widely-held belief among Armenians in Lebanon can also be supported by archival data. If this belief is indeed true, then it will be interesting to discover whether the attitudes of these governments did play any role in restraining one or more of the warring factions from forcing the Armenians to take sides. It can be safely claimed, however, that the Soviet Armenian government, and by extension the Kremlin, were broadly supportive of the joint Armenian stand in Lebanon.²⁰ This Soviet attitude was a stark departure from 1958, when Moscow and Yerevan had openly backed the pro-opposition Hunchakian-Ramkavar-Communist coalition against the pro-government Dashnaks.

²⁰ Avetis Demirchian, then the leader of the Hunchakian Party, writes that Karen Demirchian, the First Secretary of the Communist Party organization in Soviet Armenia, highly praised the policy of ‘positive neutrality’ during a meeting of delegates from Lebanon, held in Erevan in December 1978; see Avaguan, *Hayutian*, p. 37.

Finally, the fact that Turkey was not directly involved in the Lebanese Civil War also facilitated the implementation of the Armenian policy of ‘positive neutrality.’ Throughout the war years, Ankara continued to maintain a hostile attitude toward the Armenian Diasporan organizations and their political demands from Turkey. Had the Turkish government actively backed any of the warring sides in Lebanon, this would have made it extremely difficult for Armenians to justify their neutral stand.²¹

Despite all these favorable factors, maintaining ‘positive neutrality’ still proved both difficult and costly. It only minimized Armenian casualties, but could not avert them altogether.²² Many Armenians lost their businesses because of the prolonged fighting and widespread looting. Around half the Armenian population left the country for good,²³ including many Dashnak party-members, the latter despite the party leadership’s fierce opposition to emigration.²⁴

²¹ Nevertheless, some Armenians in Lebanon have suggested that, behind-the-scenes, Turkey was encouraging the emigration of Armenians from Lebanon to Western countries by asking the latter to facilitate the granting of entry visas. Many Armenians believe that the weakening of the Armenian communities in countries neighboring Turkey will constitute a setback for Armenian irredentism. This argument was subsequently adopted by Karlen Dallakian, the secretary in charge of ideological work at the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Soviet Armenia during the war years in Lebanon; see Karlen Dallakian, *H.B.E. Miutian nakhagah K. Giulbenkiani hrazharakani harts'i shurj* [Concerning the Issue of the Resignation of C. Gulbenkian, President of the Armenian General Benevolent Union] (Erevan, 1996), p. 97. Moreover, Turkey was involved in targeting members of Lebanon-based Armenian organizations, which had benefited from the government’s loss of its monopoly on violence across the country, and had begun training their members in Lebanon and using its territory as a launch pad to organize the assassination of Turkish diplomats in other countries. Turkey benefited from the Israeli invasion of 1982 because the camps which the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) was using for training purposes were uprooted as a consequence of Palestinian withdrawal from south Lebanon; see Markar Melkonian, *My Brother's Road: An American's Fateful Journey to Armenia* (London and New York, 2005), pp. 104-107. A few observers have surmised that it is likely that there was even some Turkish-Israeli cooperation in this regard. Moreover, when Apo Ashjian was abducted in Bourj Hammoud and disappeared in 1982, the Dashnak Party directly blamed the Turkish government for the abduction; see Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 291-296. Ashjian was reputedly one of the masterminds behind the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide, another clandestine anti-Turkish group, but one believed to be closely linked to the Dashnaks.

²² Melgon Eplighatian, an Armenian parliamentary deputy, estimates that around 300 Armenians were killed during the first two years of the civil war alone. He asserts that the names of 269 Armenian victims were verified by the community leadership. Moreover, he adds that 1886 Armenians were wounded during the same period; see Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, p. 5.

²³ Primarily as a consequence of this emigration, the number of students in Armenian community schools across Lebanon decreased sharply from 21,000 during the academic year 1974-1975 to only 11,939 in 1991-1992; see Hourig Attarian, *Armenian Schools and Education in Lebanon: Fostering a New Culture of Learning, Teaching, and Practice* (Lisbon, 2014), p. 13.

²⁴ Andranik Urfalian, *Kianki me hetkerov* [With the Marks of a Life] (Los Angeles, 1991?), pp. 682-683; Avagian, *Hayutian*, p. 19.

On the political front, it proved challenging for Armenian leaders not to take part in the war and yet demand at the same time some say in the negotiations for a peaceful settlement to the conflict.²⁵ During certain crucial moments in the war, Armenian leaders felt that they were being ignored by the more powerful actors, who were both engaged in the political process and had more effective military forces on the ground.²⁶ Moreover, Armenians had to outline their political positions with extreme care so as not to provoke any of the powerful warring sides.²⁷

A certain capability for self-defense proved beneficial in the Armenian-inhabited quarter of Bourj Hammoud, north of Beirut, which found itself in the cross-fire between Palestinian and Christian militiamen in 1975-1976.²⁸ The first years of the civil war witnessed serious tensions between the Armenian parties and Maronite militiamen. The latter were angry that Armenians were not assisting them in defending and preserving the Lebanese *status-quo*, which privileged the Christians, against the Muslim/pan-Arabist/leftist challenge.²⁹ Armenians, in turn, were worried that some Maronites were seriously considering a possible partition of the country.³⁰ These frictions even escalated at times to limited armed clashes between Armenian and Maronite gunmen in 1978 and 1979.³¹

Bourj Hammoud again appeared in a precarious position in arguably the last stages of the civil war, during interim Prime Minister General Michel 'Awn's 'War of Liberation' against the Syrian army's presence in Lebanon in 1988-1990 and his concurrent 'War of Elimination' against the Lebanese Forces, the main Christian militia.³² Fortunately, tensions between 'Awn and the Armenian parties, especially the Dashnaks, did not degenerate into armed clashes on this occasion.

²⁵ Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, p. 48.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁷ Eplighatian asserts that there was a period during the war when the Dashnak leadership instructed the editors of the party's newspaper not to use the word "unity" in their columns, for opposing factions had contrasting interpretations of that term; see Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, p. 44.

²⁸ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 32-33, 134-150; Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, pp. 34, 41-44.

²⁹ Hayk Naggashian, *Berkahavak: Husher ev Patmuatskner* (Erevan, 2001), pp. 129-131; Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 29-30, 38, 114, 151-155; Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, pp. 29-32, 37-40; Simonian and Danielian, *Vahrich Cherechian*, pp. 215-219; Migliorino, *(Re)constructing*, p. 153. For a sharp criticism of the Armenian position from a militant Maronite viewpoint, made on February 23, 1979, see Rani Geha (ed.), *Words from Bashir: Understanding the Mind of Lebanese Forces Founder Bashir Gemayel from His Speeches* (2009), pp. 21-24.

³⁰ Avagian, *Hayutian*, p. 115.

³¹ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 40, 117-129, 134-163, 302; Geukjian, 'Policy,' p. 70; Yacoubian, 'Politics,' pp. 52-53.

However, effective self-defense by Armenians throughout the war years was only possible in Bourj Hammoud, the political ‘fiefdom’ of the Dashnaks.³³ The Hunchakians failed to maintain control of their traditional stronghold, the neighboring quarters of Hadjin and Khalil Badawi in East Beirut; these were eventually taken over by Christian militiamen. In largely Muslim-inhabited West Beirut, the Dashnaks initially had some problems with Palestinian armed factions.³⁴ They failed in their attempt to establish – similar to Bourj Hammoud – a buffer zone encompassing a few Armenian-inhabited quarters in West Beirut, and just managed to post some Armenian armed youth in a few community institutions to protect the latter from possible squatters or looters.³⁵ The worst incident affecting Armenians in West Beirut occurred in 1986. A few Armenians were killed, wounded or kidnapped as a ‘punishment’ for an Armenian parliamentary deputy joining representatives of militant Christian factions to present a peace initiative, which a number of Muslim factions rejected immediately.³⁶ An estimated 30 to 40 thousand Armenians lived in West Beirut in 1975. They were usually better-off than their ethnic kin in the ‘popular’ quarters of East Beirut and Bourj Hammoud, and they were among the first to emigrate from Lebanon. Other Armenians also gradually moved from West to Christian-inhabited East Beirut, citing that the degree of lawlessness there was much less. By the end of the war, only a handful of Armenians were left in West Beirut, and most Armenian institutions there had been closed or sold. The Dashnaks also organized self-defense in the Armenian-inhabited village of Anjar in the Bika‘ Valley.³⁷ However, there was no such initiative for the smaller Armenian communities in the cities of Tripoli and Zahlé.

Today, a quarter of a century after the formal end of the civil war, an Armenian community, estimated by various observers at anything between 50 and 80 thousand, persists in Lebanon. It is undoubtedly more modest in its transnational stature among Armenians outside the by now post-Soviet, independent homeland than it was some forty years ago. Lebanon is still considered, however, one of the more vibrant centers of the Armenian Diaspora.

³² Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 25, 43-44, 164-167.

³³ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 134-129; Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, pp. 33-36.

³⁴ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 30-31.

³⁵ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 20, 76-80; Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, pp. 36, 40-41.

³⁶ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 37, 302; Avsharian, ‘The *Ta’ef* Agreement,’ pp. 396-397; Yacoubian, ‘Politics,’ p. 61.

³⁷ Avagian, *Hayutian*, pp. 168-172; Eplighatian, *Gaghtakayanen*, II, p. 37.

Nevertheless, the years since the end of the civil war have been politically turbulent for Lebanon, often punctuated with relatively short, but painful episodes of political violence. Therefore, the future prospects of the Armenian community in Lebanon remain precarious. This feeling of insecurity among Armenians in Lebanon has increased in the past decade because of the extreme polarization in Lebanese politics since the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005, followed by the repercussions on Lebanon of the ongoing Syrian Civil War since 2011. Not only have the modern Armenian communities in Lebanon and Syria a common origin, they have also maintained throughout the past century very intimate cultural and family relationships. The Armenian community in Lebanon outlived its host country's civil war, but many Armenians in Lebanon today wonder if their ethnic kin in Syria will similarly survive the ongoing conflict there. They fear that if the Armenian community in Syria is eventually devastated because of the enduring mass violence, the Armenians in Lebanon may thereafter be unable to hold out on their own for long.

ARMENIANS AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011 TO THE PRESENT)

Syria is a much bigger country than Lebanon. Her population at the start of the conflict was estimated at 23 million. Her geographical location is also more critical than Lebanon's. Therefore, international actors have higher stakes in the outcome of the current conflict. Consequently, the amount of casualties, destruction, the internally displaced people and refugees is also much higher.³⁸

Like Lebanon's, the nature of the Syrian Civil War has also metamorphosed since its outbreak. The initial disturbances in March 2011 were similar to the earlier uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Demands were confined to the democratization of the political system, release of political prisoners, abolition of emergency laws, and an end to corruption. The Syrian government's

³⁸ For recent studies on the ongoing Syrian Civil War, see James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 93-118; Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012); Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford, California, 2012); Emile Hokayem, *Syria's*

response was harsher than those of Tunisia and Egypt. From the beginning, it has claimed time and again that conspirators and foreign powers are seeking to bring it down. Its security forces resorted to disproportionate firepower almost immediately, pushing the opposition to take up arms, too. In July, defectors from the official Syrian army set up the Free Syrian Army (FSA), vowing to topple the regime. A coalition of anti-government political groups was formed in Turkey in August, an early indicator of direct foreign involvement in the conflict. In October, Ankara allowed the FSA to operate its command and headquarters from Turkish territory and launch attacks into northern Syria, while using the Turkish side of the border as a safe zone and supply route. The Syrian rebels also receive enormous assistance from the Arab Gulf states and smaller amounts from Western governments. Boosted by this international support, the rebels gained control of large parts of northern and eastern Syria, including border checkpoints with Turkey and Iraq. Some twenty countries have recognized the opposition coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The latter was also granted Syria's seat in the Arab League in March 2013. Conversely, the Syrian government in Damascus has received backing from Iran, Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. However, no effective unified leadership of the opposition has emerged to date, despite the fact that various factions of the opposition control, at the time of writing in March 2015, around half of Syria's territory and population. In addition to the northern and eastern regions mentioned above, the southern parts of Syria, those bordering Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, are also in the hands of opposition factions.

So called jihadist factions, particularly the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), gradually came to play an important role in the Syrian Civil War as well, marginalizing the FSA in the process. The growth of the jihadist factor remains controversial. Many analysts contend that regional powers opposed to the Syrian government facilitated their entry to Syria after having deduced that the FSA would not be able to defeat the regime on its own. Observers sympathetic to the opposition counter-argue, however, that the Syrian government itself intentionally released imprisoned Islamist radicals and armed them during the early stages of the conflict so as to make itself appear as the least bad choice before the

Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant (London, 2013); David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, New Updated Edition (Yale, 2013).

international community. The regime has indeed tried to exploit the growing weight of jihadists in the opposition so as to portray itself as the guardian of religious diversity and tolerance in the country. In any case, these jihadist groupings are now fighting not only against the government, but also against the FSA, the Kurdish militias and even against one another, further aggravating an already complicated situation.

By now, the Syrian conflict is being described as overtly sectarian in nature. Although successive post-independence Syrian governments had gradually dismantled the confessional representation system inherited from the mandate period, the ongoing war has shown clearly that confessionalism still reigns in the hearts of many Syrians. The Ba‘th Party has been ruling Syria since 1963. Its detractors had long contended that, since the internal party coup in 1966, members of the ‘Alawi minority and, more recently, the al-Asad family had concentrated all real levers of power in their own hands. Opponents and critics had accused the government of treating the majority Arab Sunni population and ethnic minorities like Kurds and Turkmens (who are also overwhelmingly Sunni) with suspicion and disdain. Today, Sunnis, both Arab and non-Arab, together constitute three-quarters of Syria’s total population. They are also believed to be providing the overwhelming majority of the FSA fighters. The jihadists from Syria are also exclusively Sunni, but they are fighting alongside other Sunni volunteers from other Muslim states or from Muslim minority communities residing in Western countries. A number of Turkmen political factions are also part of the opposition coalition. Kurdish groups, however, appear to be divided among pro- and anti-government factions, while a third group seems to steer a middle course, with all but the declared intention of carving up a self-governing Kurdish territory in northeastern Syria. In the pro-government camp, ‘Alawis are the backbone of the regime of President Bashar al-Asad, while the minority Christians and the Druze also appear to be more accepting of the existing system. Moreover, the government still commands the loyalty of a considerable portion of the country’s Arab Sunni majority.

This article will now study the Armenian dilemma in the midst of this turmoil. During this analysis, the situation in Lebanon some forty years ago will always remain the point of reference or comparison. To start with, during the three decades bridging Lebanon’s independence with the outbreak of the civil war, the Armenian community had steadily grown in the country. On the

other hand, 65 years had elapsed from Syria's independence when that country, too, plunged into a bloody civil war. During those six-and-a-half decades, the Armenian community in Syria had noticeably declined, both in numbers and more sharply in percentage terms. The encyclopedia of the Armenian Diaspora, published in 2003, put the number of Armenians in Syria between 65 and 70 thousand³⁹ – down from around 100,000 in 1938. The largest wave of Armenian emigration from Syria occurred in the 1960s.⁴⁰ Moreover, Syria's total population increased almost tenfold during the same 65 years. Thereby, by 2011, Armenians constituted only around 0.3 percent of the total population – down from about 4 percent in the mid-1940s.

This gradually dwindling Armenian community in Syria also lived in a political and cultural environment very different from Lebanon in 1975. After gaining independence, Syria enjoyed very brief periods of political pluralism, competitive elections and democratically elected governments.⁴¹ A series of military coups formally ended consociationalism and led to an extremely centralized system of government, which also restricted many of the cultural freedoms Armenians had enjoyed. With the gradual deconstruction of the confessional representation system, Armenian representation in Syria's legislature declined from 1973 onward to just a token single deputy among a total membership of 250. Compare this to the four deputies Armenians had in the 70-member Syrian chambers of 1928 and 1932.⁴² Successive post-independence

³⁹ Hovhannes Ayyvazyan (ed.), *Hay Spyurk: Hanragitaran* [The Armenian Diaspora: Encyclopedia] (Erevan, 2003), p. 508.

⁴⁰ In 1969, Eghishe Hakobian, the attaché to the Soviet Embassy in Beirut, reported that over 30,000 Armenians had migrated from the various regions of Syria in recent years to Lebanon alone; see National Archives of Armenia (NAA), Erevan, fund 326, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, register 1, file 449, ff. 1-5. Aida Boudjikianian, a scholar, gives a higher estimate of between 40 and 60 thousand for the year 1975, underlining at the same that, for many of these Armenian migrants from Syria, Lebanon was simply a passing point on the road to permanent settlement in third countries; Aida Boudjikianian, 'L'Espace libanais au regard des migrations arméniennes,' *Hannon: Revue libanaise de géographie*, vol. 18 (1982-1984), p. 35. Armenians were leaving Syria because of the Arabization and socialistic policies of successive governments in general, as well as to escape political and cultural restrictions specifically targeting the Armenian community after the Syrian security agencies reportedly uncovered in 1961 a "secret organization" within the Dashnak Party ranks, arrested many party members, tried, and ultimately condemned sixteen of them of "for espionage in favor of a foreign power"; see Migliorino, *Re(constructing)*, p. 164.

⁴¹ For the history of Syria after independence, see Gordon Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military 1945-1958* (Columbus, 1964); Tabitha Petran, *Syria: A Modern History* (London and Tonbridge, 1978); Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, 1988); Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London, 2000); Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party*, 4th edition (London, 2011).

⁴² For detailed information about Armenian representation in the Syrian legislature, see Nura Arisian, *Al-nuwab al-arman fi al-majalis al-niyabiyah al-suriyah (1928-2011)* [The Armenian Deputies in the Syrian Chamber of Deputies] (Damascus, 2011).

Syrian governments tolerated the unofficial existence of Armenian political parties, which controlled community life through their affiliate charity, sporting and cultural organizations and through their domination of the lay bodies of the Armenian Church. However, government supervision was much stricter in Syria, compared to Lebanon.

Most such restrictions had been imposed before Hafiz al-Asad took power in 1970. The uninterrupted rule of the al-Asad family ever since is therefore seen in perspective as a period which witnessed a partial recovery of the conditions of Armenians in Syria.⁴³ Some observers talk of an unwritten deal, which emerged during this epoch between the regime and the Armenian community. Others counter-argue, however, that this so-called ‘deal’ with Armenians was not different from the way other Christian communities were treated. In any case, the governments of Hafiz and, later, Bashar al-Asad imposed no additional drastic restrictions on Armenian schools and cultural activities, and some of the laws already in place were now interpreted less stringently than before. Nevertheless, Armenians never became full devotees of the al-Asad regime, and very few of them actually joined the ruling Ba‘th Party.⁴⁴ They just came to conclude that this regime was generally good for the non-Sunni minorities, and they felt secure as they came to grasp the nuances of the regime’s *modus operandi*. However, the absence of democratic politics and competitive elections deprived the Armenian parties of the possibility of establishing links with other political factions in the country, an asset which had been very useful to Armenians in Lebanon in 1975. The only real ‘political skills’ which Armenian leaders could accumulate when running the affairs of their community were the personal links they had established over the years with various influential Syrian government officials and officers in the all-powerful security agencies, the *mukhabarat*.

Like Armenians in Lebanon in 1975, the Armenian inhabitants of Syria were also generally content with the conditions of their community in 2011. They also feared that any drastic change in the political system may erode the cultural rights they enjoyed. Therefore, they also proclaimed their commitment to Syria’s national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

⁴³ Migliorino, *(Re)constructing*, p. 222.

⁴⁴ Simon Payaslian, ‘Diasporan Subalternities: The Armenian Community in Syria,’ *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 16, nos. 1/2 (2007), p. 117 estimates the total number of the Armenian members of the Ba‘th Party in 1996 at approximately 400.

Many educated Armenians from Syria now privately admit that the country did need social, economic and administrative reforms, especially a reduction in levels of corruption. They also express regret that the initial protests did not lead into some sort of dialogue between the government and the unarmed opposition, based on an agenda to introduce peaceful and gradual changes in the country's constitution and political system.

However, once the conflict became militarized, the Armenians felt obliged to adopt a clear position so as to weather the political storm with minimum losses. It is now commonly admitted, again in private, that replicating the policy of 'positive neutrality' pursued in Lebanon was not possible in Syria. While the central government and the state institutions were at times 'above' the ongoing fighting in Lebanon, their counterparts in Syria constitute one of the two main warring camps since 2011. The government of Bashar al-Asad is seeking to maintain total power with as few concessions as possible. The Syrian opposition is diverse, disorganized and full of internal rivalries. One conviction which still unites the opposition is their equating the existing state structures with the al-Asad family. Therefore, their only common objective is the toppling of the president and his entourage, even when they cannot agree on the new Syrian state structure which would follow. Indeed, almost from the start of the conflict in 2011, the Syrian government and the opposition began hoisting two different national flags.⁴⁵ Armenians, therefore, cannot emulate their ethnic kin in wartime Lebanon and underline their neutrality by 'hiding' behind the national flag. In order to appear as convincingly neutral, they should minimize the use of *both* flags as much as possible!⁴⁶

Despite their desire to appear to be devout Syrian nationalists, 'above' the ongoing conflict, Armenians have in effect remained trapped in the pro-government camp. The reasons are manifold:

⁴⁵ The government continues to raise the flag first adopted between 1958 and 1961, when Syria and Egypt jointly formed the United Arab Republic. This flag was readopted under Hafiz al-Asad in 1980, as a symbol of Syria's continued commitment to the ideal of Arab unity. The opposition, on the other hand, has returned to the flag used by Syrians between 1930 and 1958, i.e. the mandate and early independence period.

⁴⁶ With the emergence of a jihadist pole in the opposition, an altogether different flag, the black flag, has also appeared on the Syrian soil. However, its advent has not affected the Armenians directly. Firstly, the jihadists do not believe in the legal existence of a separate Syrian state. Secondly, they have made no attempts to attract the loyalty of non-Sunnis as equal partners in a common effort. Finally, practically no Armenian communities have survived in areas overtaken by the jihadists.

1. Armenians continue to see the al-Asad regime as some sort of guarantee for their limited, but time-tested cultural rights, which have helped them to preserve their language and separate ethnic identity. The increasing prominence of the jihadist wing in the opposition has hardened this conviction.
2. A whole generation of Armenians has been raised under the watchful eye of the *mukhabarat*, and these youth and middle-aged people remain wary of taking risks and testing the new limits of freedom.
3. The al-Asad regime continues to deny its populace, including Armenians, the opportunity to engage in open political activity. It continues to punish harshly all dissenters in areas still under its control.
4. Armenians could not establish working relations with any of the major opposition factions, partly because of their enforced political inexperience. However, it should also be admitted that the opposition, in turn, has failed to present a moderate, inclusive image to the non-Sunni minorities. Indeed, almost all Armenians have fled their homes if the latter have come under the control of any of the opposition factions.⁴⁷ Let alone direct contacts with the different opposition groups, Armenians are reportedly absent even from all efforts in second-track diplomacy, at a time when other minorities, like the Kurds and other Christians, are represented at such meetings.
5. The al-Asad regime has successfully instilled among all minorities the viewpoint that the opposition is dominated by radical Sunni factions and that any change of regime would harm their interests. Indeed, a few Armenians privately blame the pro-government media for at times dramatizing Armenian losses during the fighting and shelling in order to generate an atmosphere of panic among the latter and keep them under check. Nevertheless, numerous Armenians, including many who have already left Syria and may not ever return, continue to defend the official line that the conflict is simply the consequence of a foreign plot.
6. Turkey quickly became a very important player in the Syrian Civil War, backing the opposition and calling for Bashar al-Asad's immediate departure. Armenians feared that Turkey would use her support for the opposition to push the latter to take specific

measures to further weaken the Armenian position in Syria and force their emigration from an area close to the Turkish frontier and the historic Armenian homeland, which many Armenians still dream of returning to one day.⁴⁸

There was no independent Armenia in 1975. In contrast, the Syrian conflict is waging at a time Armenia is a sovereign state on the international arena. The Armenian government has also tried to stay neutral, but that ‘neutrality’ is tilted toward the al-Asad regime. Armenia maintains diplomatic relations with the latter, and its embassy and consulate in Damascus and Aleppo, respectively, are still open. Armenia’s close relations with Russia are also known to the Syrian opposition and thus further strain the latter’s unfriendly attitude toward the Armenian community in the country.

During the first weeks of protests, most Armenians remained extremely loyal to the regime. Many of them willingly participated in officially sanctioned pro-Asad marches. Many believed that the unrest would soon die down. However, as the conflict intensified, Armenian community organizations and media outlets adopted a more cautious official line, refraining, as a rule, from offering any commentary on political developments. Even with this extreme prudence, the Armenian community has born heavy losses. An estimated half or more of Syria’s pre-civil war Armenian population is by now outside the country, and most of these do not intend to return. Hakob Gabrielian, killed in Aleppo on 1 March 2015, was reported to be the Armenian community’s 150th victim in this conflict.⁴⁹ Other observers estimate that the total number of casualties is actually around 200, and this number does not include those Armenian civilians who have been abducted by one of the warring factions or by simple gangsters and whose

⁴⁷ There are some unconfirmed reports that Armenians outside Syria did make a few timid attempts to establish some sort of a contact with the FSA. However, there appears to be no common ground at all to make a similar effort with the jihadist groups.

⁴⁸ The al-Asad government, in turn, has used the Armenian Genocide card in its media campaign against Turkey. However, this has not left much impact on the Armenians themselves, for they remember and often remind one another that only a few years earlier, during the ‘honeymoon’ between Bashar al-Asad and the then Turkish Prime Minister (now, President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the early 2000s, the same government had imposed restrictions on Armenians in Syria during their annual commemoration of the genocide. Moreover, President al-Asad had skipped visiting the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Erevan during his official visit to Armenia in June 2009; see Hakob Cholakian, *Kesapi erek orere (21-23 Mart 2014)* [The Three Days of Kesap (21-23 March 2014)] (Erevan, 2014), p. 116.

whereabouts remain unknown. Armenian conscripts continue to serve in the official Syrian army, and some have been killed on duty.⁵⁰ Moreover, a handful of Armenian soldiers are still classified as missing in action, while a few others have managed to desert. Some of the latter sought refuge in Armenia – ironically with certain Turkish assistance. Male Armenian youth of military service age try to leave the country to avoid a possible call up. The government asked Armenians, as well as others in areas under its control, to volunteer as individuals in the paramilitary organizations it has set up to fight alongside the official army and other security agencies. Armenian sources are predictably reluctant to divulge numbers or even estimates on those who have actually joined such groups. It is clear, however, that there has been very little community encouragement in this regard and those who have actually volunteered are not many. Despite this determination to maintain as low a profile as possible, a few Armenians from Syria, consulted during the preparation of this article, expressed their personal belief that Armenians have become, for opposition circles, the most hated among Syria's various Christian ethno-religious groups. They are taken to be 'less neutral' than the other Christians, probably for the reasons listed above, but also because of the linguistic divide which sharply differentiates the Armenians from Syria's other Christian communities. It is still difficult, however, to ascertain whether the targeting and destruction of famous Armenian landmarks, like the St. Gevorg Church in Aleppo in October 2012 and the Armenian Church and Genocide Memorial in Deir Zor in September 2014, were intentional – so as to specifically 'punish' the 'pro-government' Armenians – or just another byproduct of an already vicious conflict.

Armenians, of course, live in various parts of Syria, and the different fates of these respective communities have been shaped by the specificities of the civil war in its particular region. The Armenian community in Aleppo is the largest in Syria, estimated at 50,000 prior to 2011.⁵¹ Armenians have deserted those parts of Aleppo which have come under opposition control or are

⁴⁹ Naira Bulghadaryan, 'Kianke Halepum "gnalov aveli larvats u antaneli e darnum" [Life in Aleppo "Is Gradually Becoming More Tense and Unbearable"]', *Radio Liberty (Azatutyun)*, 2 March 2015; see <http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/26877518.html>.

⁵⁰ The first such casualty was the army conscript Vigen Hayrapetean, who was killed in Aleppo, when two suicide car bombs targeted the Syrian regional military and security headquarters on 10 February 2012, claiming 28 victims; see Nanore Barsoumian, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Challenges Facing the Armenian Community in Syria,' *The Armenian Weekly*, Saturday, February 18, 2012, p. 9.

⁵¹ For this and other estimates of Armenian populations in various cities and regions of Syria, see Ayvazyan, *Hay Spyurk*, pp. 516-520.

very close to the line of contact. In the government-controlled part of the city, where the majority of Armenians lived before the war, they remain dependent on the regime as before. Unlike in Lebanon after 1975, there is no noticeable increase in Armenian self-government in Aleppo since 2011. The Syrian Armenian Body for Emergency Relief and Reconstruction, which has brought together various Armenian religious, political and social organizations, confines its activities to the distribution of aid. During the 2012 parliamentary elections organized by the al-Asad government under war conditions, Armenians even lost their seat in Aleppo. It went to a member of an influential Arab tribe. The appointment of Nazira Sarkis as Minister of State for Environment Affairs was perhaps some sort of compensation. She is an ethnic Armenian from Ya‘qubiyah, but speaks very little Armenian. She is only the second Armenian to hold a ministerial portfolio in modern Syrian history,⁵² but her appointment made little impression on Armenians.

Damascus is still under government control, and casualties in this 5,000-strong Armenian community have been relatively less. However, people remain wary of the future, and some families have also preferred to emigrate, to Armenia, Lebanon or elsewhere. A number of small Armenian communities have practically been destroyed when their towns were captured by the opposition, especially jihadist groups. Ya‘qubiyah, Qunaya, Ghenamiya in the Orontes Valley, Tall al-Abyad and al-Raqqah in northern Syria, and Dar‘ah in the south are in this category. The capture of the villages around Kesap and the fleeing of their around 2,000 inhabitants in March 2014 attracted considerable international attention. Although government troops recaptured Kesap in June, and some Armenians have returned, it is widely believed that Armenian life would never regain its vibrancy there. There appears to be no direct persecution of Armenians in Kurdish-controlled areas in al-Jazirah, where about 16,000 lived in 2011, but there is noticeable Armenian emigration from this area as well, primarily to Scandinavia. At the time of writing, the coastal city of Latakia, an ‘Alawi stronghold, seems to be the safest among all locations where Armenians live.

⁵² The first Armenian to become a cabinet minister in modern Syria was Fathallah Asyun, a Catholic from Aleppo. He held the portfolios of Public Works and Communications, and, then, of Health, following the elections to the Constituent Assembly in late 1949. He returned as a minister in the Syrian cabinet soon after the break-up of the union with Egypt in 1961. On this occasion, he held the portfolios of social affairs and employment and industry.

It is difficult to foresee, of course, how long the Syrian Civil War will endure and whether the Armenian community in Syria will survive this tragedy as a viable entity. At the moment, most Armenians appear pessimistic. Many argue that even if the armed conflict comes to an end, the country's future will remain bleak for a long time. And as Armenians continue to flee Syria in large numbers, the long-term prospects of their ethnic kin in neighboring Lebanon will also be affected negatively, as was stated earlier in this article.