

Armenian Clergy and Conflict Management in Lebanon, 1920-1994

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Abstract This essay discusses the role played by Church institutions and leaders in the history of the Armenians of Lebanon after their settlement in the country. The development of Armenian institutions in Lebanon is marked since the period of the French Mandate by the pervasive role played by political parties based on mass mobilisation. Through alliances and expediency, these parties managed to carve out their own quotas in Lebanon's peculiar power-sharing system. However, Armenians in Lebanon remained highly vulnerable to domestic volatility and regional tensions. Church deliberative organs became a site of conflict among opposed political agendas related to the definition of Armenian and Lebanese national identities, Lebanon's foreign policy, and the relation between the Soviet Union and the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East. Despite these constraints, Armenian Churches remained a vital component in the preservation of Armenian culture and heritage.

Keywords Diaspora. Nationalism. Sectarianism. Conflict management. Armenian Church. Lebanon.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Survival and Settlement. The French Mandate. – 3 Rapprochement and Repatriation Attempts. – 4 Conflicts around the Church between 1956 and 1958. – 5 Third Parties and Positive Neutrality. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

According to Nalbantian (2013a), the Armenians of Lebanon are rarely considered in Lebanese historiography. Scholarship of different ideological persuasions (Maronite nationalist, pan-Arab, Marxist) often focused on the claims and narratives of the principal sects, or participated in the debate on



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the 'Phoenician' or Arab national identity of the country. Armenians were usually framed as marginal or recently settled aliens. On the other hand, Nalbantian argues how Armenian diasporic historiography was usually concentrated on unidimensional pan-Armenian narratives and grand conceptual definitions, with scant attention to the multiplicity of ways through which Armenians participated to Lebanon's volatile political arena and negotiated their identity. This limited attention to the history and politics of Armenian settlement in Lebanon is even more surprising when one considers the proximity among Lebanese Christian (in particular Maronite and Greek Catholic) and Armenian diasporic networks in cities such as Marseille, Montréal, Los Angeles, Boston, or Sydney (Abdulkarim 1994), and the role that the research on diasporic communities played in a more thorough understanding of Lebanese history. According to Khater (2001, 180-8), the experience of modernity in Lebanon during the twentieth century and its impact on lifestyles and politics cannot be disconnected from multiple experiences of migration, displacement and resettlement, a wide range of nuanced and hyphenated identities, and the impact of diasporic processes on familial networks, gender roles, and the emergence of a new middle class with its demands of political representation.

The history of Armenians in Lebanon can be better understood as a project, led by political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual elites, that sought to recast the image of the Armenians not merely as survivors in exile, but rather as a constituent group of the variegated fabric of Lebanese society, crafting its own niche within the social and political system. The Armenians of Lebanon (and Syria) strove to preserve their distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity, as they found themselves caught among competing state-building and nation-building projects (Migliorino 2008, 221-3). In Syria, regardless of the staunchly secular rhetoric under the rule of the Ba'ath party since 1963, Armenian religious institutions were maintained and still act as a modern reinterpretation of the Ottoman *millet* system,¹ therefore mediating between members of the community and the state (McCallum 2012). In Lebanon, on the other hand, the Armenian political parties and religious institutions sought to transform the im-

1 Under the Ottoman administrative system, matters pertaining to personal status and family affairs (such as marriage and inheritance) for non-Muslim subjects were devolved to a system of religious courts that applied the canon law of each denomination. During the nineteenth century, the term was used for all the ethno-religious minorities that were recognized by the imperial government through edicts and concessions of special statutes. The ongoing scholarly debate is problematizing previously held assumptions on the *millet* as a homogeneous, institutionalized system, pointing out a variety of context-specific practices and arrangements. Eissenstat (2015) offers an assessment of patterns of 'imperial nationalism' and the ethnicization of confessional identities in the nineteenth century.

age of Armenian post-1915 refugees into that of a respectable working class that could blend into Lebanon's system of power-sharing along confessional lines (Watenpaugh 2015, 619). The intention was to portray the Armenians as a trustworthy, hard-working community, and to insulate them from the stigma attached to geographically contiguous ethnic or religious groups (such as Palestinians, Kurds, Shi'a, Dom) that were loathed by the Beirut bourgeois elites.

Through her ethnography of Burj Hammoud, Nucho (2016) shows how Armenian political parties built a dense network of relations and services, and started to claim physical control of some areas on the edge of Beirut in order to claim their share in Lebanon's sectarian system. Nondescript peri-urban spaces were therefore transformed into distinctly Armenian places, with an explicit identity reinforced by linguistic, religious, and ethnic markers. This process was not tantamount to the formation of an ethnic ghetto, but a deliberate choice to become part of Lebanon's social fabric and political system as one of its confessional communities. Whereas Tölölyan (2000) investigates Armenian elites mainly in terms of transition from nationalism-in-exile to diasporic transnationalism, Nalbantian (2008) warns against a monolithic understanding of Armenian identity, whether in Lebanon or in the rest of the diaspora. On the one hand, multiple definitions of homeland (*hayrenik'*) and patriotic (*hayrenamerj*) identity persist until today. On the other hand, the process of identity redefinition among the Armenians of Lebanon was beset by internal fissures and outbreaks of conflict.

This essay discusses the role played by Armenian Church institutions and leaders throughout the tensions and conflicts that affected the Armenians of Lebanon at large. The term 'Armenian clergy' is used here to define the upper clergy and ecclesial bodies of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Church,² and the Patriarchate of Cilicia of the Armenian Catholic Church. Three levels of conflict are considered here: internal (within the Armenian community in Lebanon), domestic (between Armenian and other social actors in Lebanon), and international (between the diaspora and the Soviet government before 1988). As Barak (2002) explains, the study of intra-communal dimensions of conflict is usu-

2 Due to historical circumstances, the Armenian Apostolic Church has two distinct authorities, each with its own organs and jurisdiction: the Catholicos of All Armenians, based in Etchmiadzin, with a preeminent supremacy in spiritual matters; and the Catholicos of Cilicia, based in Sis (the former capital of the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia), who traditionally ruled over the dioceses of the Ottoman Empire. The Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople (Istanbul) were highly revered for spiritual and political reasons, the latter in particular acting as a representative of the whole Armenian nation in the Ottoman system of government. A separate Catholicosate of Aghtamar, whose jurisdiction had shrunk in Ottoman times over the southern shores of Lake Van, remained vacant after 1895.

ally underresearched. Approaches based on the securitization theory (Darwich, Fakhoury 2016) tend to overlook the role of identity entrepreneurs, essentialize identities, and fail to capture the dynamics of power-brokering and patronage networks that were (and still are) crucial in the Lebanese parliamentary elections and the related clientelist distribution of resources. Intra-communal diversity, according to Barak, is a source of political tension, but paradoxically also has a mitigating effect on inter-communal conflicts, because it prevents the rise of consistent, homogeneous blocs. For smaller groups such as the Armenians of Lebanon, internal conflict among different groups, vying for hegemony and resorting to alliances with non-Armenian actors, was both a factor of distress and a guarantee that the community would not be aligned with only one of the competing non-Armenian coalitions in the country. As the example of 1958 will show, the conflict between the main Armenian political parties ensured that there was an Armenian voice in both the variegated Lebanese blocs that clashed together (personal communications with the author and interviews 2017). The methods and venues for addressing and mitigating intra-communal disputes also shed light on the processes of bargaining and mediation in conflict management.

A focus on the specific history, location, and agency of the Armenians in Lebanon also helps to escape the tight boundaries of minoritization and appreciate instead their active engagement in politics and society (Nalbantian 2018).

In addition to the existing literature, this essay is based on fieldwork and interviews realized in Burj Hammoud, Antélias, and Beirut (neighborhoods of Jeitawi, Nor Hajin and Qobayat) in May 2015 and January 2017.³

2 Survival and Settlement. The French Mandate

The political and social development of the Armenians in Lebanon is marked since the beginning of the French Mandate by the role played by political parties based on mass mobilization rather than Church bodies, notables or bourgeois elites.

While a presence of Armenian Catholic communities under the protection of the Maronite Church was attested since the eighteenth

³ For the sake of consistency, the prevalent English spelling has been adopted for all personal and place names. For the same reason, the term 'Dashnak' and 'Hunchak' are used here in lieu of the Western Armenian versions 'Tashnag' and 'Hnchag', which are prevalent in Lebanon. The prevalent English spelling has been adopted also for all personal and place names in Arabic.

century (Gergian 2011),⁴ with some Armenian Catholic officials reaching the highest echelons of the local Ottoman administration (Akarlı 1993),⁵ the bulk of the Armenian community stems from the descendants of the survivors of the 1915 massacres. The first wave of Armenian refugees reached Lebanon in 1922, after the 1921 Treaty of Ankara modified the border between Kemalist Turkey and the French Mandate of Syria, which had been provisionally defined by the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. A second wave took place in 1939, with the incorporation of the Hatay district into the Republic of Turkey. According to Harboyan (1998, 38-40), nearly 25,000 Armenians from the region of Adana (Cilicia), and 8,000 from different parts of Anatolia joined the 2,000 Armenians that already lived in the former autonomous region of Mount Lebanon. Similar numbers, obtained by civil registers and French archival sources, are given in Greenshields (1978, 110, 124-7).⁶

The law on citizenship that was signed by the French High Commissioner on 19 February 1925 granted a privileged path for the naturalization of Armenian refugees as citizens of the French Mandate of Lebanon. Both the French authorities and the Maronite bourgeoisie favoured the inclusion of Armenians into the Lebanese polity as a demographical balance to the annexation of Muslim-majority areas into Greater Lebanon in 1920 (Firro 2003, 120-2).⁷

Although with very diverse social and geographical backgrounds, the refugees shared the experience of being uprooted, exiled, and extremely vulnerable to economic distress. In many instances, they were unable to move or settle freely, and stagnated in precarious camps erected on the edge of urban areas, while French attempts at resettlement schemes in the countryside failed spectacularly (Greenshields 1978, 342-3). In many respects, the dynamics among

4 Documents and archival sources registered the presence of Armenian Catholics in Ghazir since 1715 and Bzommar since 1742. See also Iskandar 1999.

5 Two Armenian Catholics were nominated governors (*mutaşarrif*) of the autonomous province of Mount Lebanon: Garabet Davoudian (Daud Paşa) from 1861 to 1868, and Ohannes Kouyoumdjian (Ohannes Paşa) from 1912 to 1915.

6 Greenshields notes, like Andézian (2017), that discrepancies and inconsistency between sets of data and various estimates should be attributed to the presence of undocumented refugees, lack of crosschecks, and patterns of swift displacement from different areas of Syria and Lebanon. The 1932 census returned a total of 26,102 Armenian 'Orthodox' (Apostolic) and 5,890 Armenian Catholics, or 3.7% of the entire population of Lebanon. According to the same census (Greenshields 1978, 434), Armenians accounted for 19.3% of the entire population of Beirut.

7 Following the signature of the Treaty of Sèvres on 10 August 1920, the French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud proclaimed on 1st September 1920 the creation of the state of 'Greater Lebanon' and its detachment from the rest of Syria. The new polity incorporated the areas of Tripoli, Saida, and the Biqa' Valley, which had a clear Muslim majority, into the former autonomous Mount Lebanon, which had a solid Maronite Christian majority.

the Armenians who had recently settled, and between them and those who already lived in Mount Lebanon before 1915, was similar to what has been studied by Der Matossian (2011) in the case of the Armenians of the British Mandate of Palestine. A crucial role was played by associations of laymen who shared the same geographical origin. These groups provided immediate relief assistance, funds, and material help that helped the newcomers, and those trickling from Aleppo and Damascus in 1925, to leave the refugee camp established in the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood and in the Quarantine area near the port, and built permanent houses in the areas of Medawar, Qobayat, and Burj Hammoud. Here, relations of proximity (based upon kinship or geographical origin) were preserved or reconstructed through spatially-based clusters of settlement, largely due to the involvement of compatriotic unions. The name of the newly-built neighbourhoods reflected the areas of origin (Adana, Marash, Sis). In addition to the edification of residential buildings and workshops, a defining moment was usually the foundation of schools with Western Armenian in lieu of Ottoman Turkish as the privileged medium of education and conversation (Jebejian 2011).

The role played by the Armenian Churches at this stage was mostly limited to immediate relief and spiritual guidance.

Like other Eastern-rite Catholic Churches, the Armenian Catholic Church had established its seat in the Kisrawan district of Mount Lebanon in the first half of the eighteenth century, with Abraham Peter I receiving the patriarchal pallium from the Pope in 1742. In 1830, a sultanal decree established a second Armenian Catholic patriarchate 'for civil purposes' in Constantinople, until Patriarch Anthony Peter IX merged both seats (the canonical and the 'civil') in 1866. In 1911, then-Patriarch Paul Peter XIII was prevented to return to Constantinople by the Unionist cabinet and wandered around until 1928, when he eventually settled in Beirut (Iskandar 1999, 70-9). In Palestine, the Armenian Catholic Church was wedged between the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Latin-rite Custody of the Holy Land, with the former accusing the Armenian Catholics of excessive Latinization and the latter accusing them of excessive nationalism (Andézian 2017). The situation was markedly different in Lebanon, where the presence of Eastern-rite Catholics was well established and the French bestowed a certain preferential treatment to the Armenian Catholics (Greenshields 1978, 453).

The first Armenian Evangelical Church was founded in Beirut in 1922, later followed by five other congregations. Particular emphasis was given to educational and medical facilities (Hovyan 2010).⁸

⁸ The decree 60 of 1936 listed all the religious denominations that were officially recognized by the Mandatory authorities and granted internal autonomy within the scope

The Armenian Apostolic Church was in a state of disarray during most of the Mandate era. Sahak II, then-Catholicos of Cilicia, was expelled from Sis to Aleppo in the summer of 1915, and later to Jerusalem, where the Patriarchal See had been vacant since 1910 (Der Matossian 2011). In July 1916, Sahak II was notified of the Ottoman decision to merge the two Catholicosates of Cilicia and Aghtamar with the two Patriarchates of Constantinople and Jerusalem, creating Sahak II as the new Catholicos-Patriarch in Jerusalem (Güllü 2016). He was allowed to return to Sis after the end of the war, but again had to flee to Damascus in precipitous conditions.⁹ Only in 1930 the Catholicosate found a permanent seat in a former orphanage in what was then a beachside village north of Beirut, and turned it into a seminary for training priests and school teachers. The compound was later enlarged and endowed with a library, a museum with several artifacts and manuscripts that had been saved between 1915 and 1921, in addition to a cathedral. Frail and in ailing conditions, Sahak II was assisted by Papken I as coadjutor, outliving him and remaining in his post until 1939. He was briefly succeeded by Bedros IV in 1940, and afterwards the position remained vacant for three years (Iskandar 1999, 121).

Meanwhile, in the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, after the establishment of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and the death of Gevorg V in 1930, the seat remained vacant for two years, until the election of Khoren I in 1932. Despite being more accommodating than his predecessor, the new Catholicos in Etchmiadzin was severely constrained by Stalin-era purges against the Church, and died in mysterious circumstances in 1938, leaving the seat vacant for seven years.

Under these burdensome circumstances, Church figures were not entirely silent or absent from the public sphere. Even in his fragile condition, Sahak II lamented the conditions of the refugees living in the Medawar camp, near the port area in Beirut, and warned the French military authorities that the Church could not be deemed responsible

of personal status (family law and inheritance regulation). Each recognized denomination needed to submit its own canon law, with its related judicial procedures and organs. The decree recognized the Armenian 'Orthodox' and the Armenian Catholic as distinct denominations. On the other hand, the decree 146 of 1938 added a general, encompassing 'Protestant' denomination that included all Evangelical congregations, both Arabic- and Armenian-speaking.

The Armenian Apostolic canon law was based on the compilation of Mkhitar Gosh, while the Armenian Catholic canon law was modified in order to make it more compatible with the Roman Catholic canon law (Rabbath [1973] 1986, 102-3, 117).

⁹ In February 1922, Sahak II wrote a pastoral letter from Damascus, "where there is no Patriarchal throne nor sceptre nor chancery nor chancellor nor seal nor crimson ink, where everything is dark" (Դամասկոսէն ուի ոչ Հայիապետական Աթոռ ու Գաւազան, ոչ հայրապետական դիւան ու դիւանադպիր, ոչ կնիք եւ ոչ ժիրանեկարմիր կան, այլ ամենայն ինչ սեւ է) (Iskandar 1999, 99-100).

for the instances of moral decay, including crime, prostitution, and street begging. In 1929, the Catholicos of Cilicia decried the vulnerability of his flock faced with the aftershock of the global economic crisis, the scarcity of proper employment, the difficulty to pay for rents and basic expenses. He also bemoaned the propagation of Communism among the Armenians of Lebanon (Greenshields 1978, 449).

In general, however, the Catholicosate of Cilicia had a conservative, quietist tradition that prevented the Church from a wider involvement in politics. The 1863 Ottoman Armenian National Constitution, which had redesigned the prerogatives of the Patriarch of Constantinople in his capacity as the secular leader of the Armenian *millet* in the Ottoman Empire, and had created an Armenian National Assembly dominated by bourgeois laymen, remained a frame of reference even after the end of World War I and the dramatic recomposition of ecclesial geographies (Der Matossian 2011). The three major Armenian political parties that had dominated the late Ottoman period were able to reorganize their ranks and files, after the initial period of resettlement, when the central role was played by the philanthropic activities of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. The main issue of contention among the Armenian political parties was the temporality of settlement in Lebanon (provisional or definitive), and the relationship with Soviet Armenia. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) considered itself as the heirs to the First Armenian Republic that had been smashed by the Red Army in December 1920, and had therefore developed a clearly anti-Bolshevik position (Tölölyan 2000). The Dashnak anticipated that Armenian nationalism could remain palatable to the Soviet leadership only if it remained strictly contained within the geographical borders of the Armenian SSR and the ideological boundaries of the projects of *korenizacija* and national-territorial delimitation in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Communists denounced the Dashnak as petit bourgeois who were more concerned with nationalist deviationism than with the interests of the working class (Ter Minassian 1978).

During the Mandate era, the Dashnak, which originally had a socialist-nationalist and anti-clerical stance, aligned at first with the Lebanese nationalists and anti-French candidates against the liberal-bourgeois, pro-establishment Ramgavar, and after 1937 became an ally of the moderate Constitutional Bloc of Bishara el-Khoury, who became the first President of independent Lebanon in 1943. In the meantime, the Hunchak were increasingly aligned with the Soviet Union. A former member of the Hunchak youth, Artin Madoyan, was one of the founders and first members of the Central Committee of the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party (Harboyan 1998, 32-8).

3 Rapprochement and Repatriation Attempts

The Popular Front doctrine on the eve of, and during World War II had a significant impact on the relations between the Soviet government and the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East. This carried significant consequences for the Apostolic Sees in Etchmiadzin and Antélias.

In 1943, the Karabagh-born and German-educated Karekin Hovsepian was enthroned as Karekin I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. Formerly a bishop under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Etchmiadzin, Karekin I actively participated in the 1918 battle of Sardarabad and fell captive during the Turkish conquest of Kars.¹⁰ In later years, he was appointed to several posts in Etchmiadzin and other dioceses in the USSR, where he established a *modus vivendi* with the Bolshevik authorities. In 1934, he was then appointed as an envoy to the Armenian communities in the USA, where he remained as primate after 1938. His ability in fundraising and his profile made Karekin palatable to the Dashnak, who appreciated his patriotic credentials gained on the ground between 1918 and 1921, and to the Kremlin, where he was deemed amenable.

In the context of the world war, a wide consensus coalesced into the candidature of Karekin Hovsepian as Catholicos of Cilicia, with the potential to bridge the ideological gulf between the Soviet government and the Dashnak, which by then were largely hegemonic in the Armenian diaspora across the Middle East. Such were the expectations around its selection that Karekin I was allowed to travel to Soviet Armenia in 1945, and participate in the election and consecration of Gevorg VI as the new Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin. One notable accomplishment of Karekin I as Catholicos of Cilicia was his promotion of cultural exchanges between the two Holy Sees and the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. In 1947, his secretary Simon Simonian became the editing director of *Hask*, the official journal of the Catholicosate of Cilicia, which had been founded in 1932 and mostly included religious and literary content. Simonian chose to add a special supplement dedicated to Armenian Studies, which quickly involved internationally-recognized Armenologists, theologians, historians, and writers (Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia 2013). In this capacity, Simonian had the opportunity to forge many personal relations with Soviet Armenian intellectuals who were already involved in the project of *Nayiri*, an Aleppo-based literary

¹⁰ The proclamation of the short-lived, Dashnak-dominated First Republic of Armenia on 28 May 1918 happened at the same time of the battle that temporarily halted the advance of the Ottoman army during the last stages of the Caucasus campaign in World War I. These events carried great emotional significance for Armenian nationalists, and contributed to the patriotic credentials of Karekin I.

journal founded in 1941 by Antranig Dzarugian that featured writings by Silva Kaputikyan, Hovhannes Shiraz, and the late Yeghishe Charents.¹¹ These publications, like *Spurk* (started in 1958), became a channel for cultural encounters and conversations between nationalist intellectuals in the Armenian SSR and in the Armenian diaspora, and eventually turned into a beacon of Armenian intellectual life in the Middle East (Migliorino 2008). This intellectual landscape is clearly a testament to the role of the Church and related organs in the edification of a complex structure of relations between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora, in an ambivalent process of identity-building that was strongly defined by the intrusion of competing ideological agendas and contentious politics (Panossian 1998).

Much more controversial was the support given by Karekin to the repatriation scheme (*nerkaght*) devised by the Soviet government in 1946. This project aimed at relocating as many as 90,000 Armenians of the diaspora, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, to the Armenian SSR. Laycock (2016) writes that the repatriation is a greatly overlooked page in Armenian diasporic history, a page that is haunted by memories of failure, delusion, disillusionment, and sense of betrayal. The grim reality of everyday Soviet Armenia was very distant from the imagined homeland that was expected, and the reception of newcomers was lukewarm at best. According to Panossian (2006, 306), around 30,000 Armenians of Syria and Lebanon were selected as a possible target for the resettlement scheme, which included a substantial transformation of the notion of homeland, recasting Soviet (Eastern) Armenia as the area to which ethnic Armenians should 'return', even when their background was Western Armenian. The Soviet Union favoured a process of de-Libanization of the Armenians in Lebanon, while the newly independent Lebanese state welcomed the prospect of getting rid of unwelcome Communist supporters (Nalbantian 2019).

The shortcomings of the repatriation scheme fed the anti-Communist discourse of the Dashnak party, which increasingly supported an alliance with Lebanese pro-Western parties in the name of Soviet containment and shared hostility towards pan-Arab nationalism, while the moderate Ramgavar and the socialist Hunchak, although ideologically distant on paper, coalesced in the name of Armenian patriotic unity (Harboyan 1998, 78-9; Krikorian 2007, 44). Repatriation schemes to the Armenian SSR were halted after 1948, but they left a scar in the relationship between Karekin I and the Dashnak,

11 The journal *Nayiri* was relocated to Beirut in 1951 and aligned often with the pro-Soviet Hunchak party, which had founded its own daily newspaper *Ararad* in 1937. The Armenian press in Lebanon also included the pro-Ramgavar daily newspaper *Zartonk* (Awakening), also founded in 1937, and *Aztag*, the official newspaper of the Dashnak party.

who had strongly criticized the Catholicos for his support to the project. The poor health conditions of Karekin I were a cause of concern for the Soviet Union, especially after the Patriarchate of Jerusalem became vacant after the death of Guregh in 1949, while the Patriarchate in Istanbul had been vacant since the death of Mesrob I in 1944. With the collapse of the credibility of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, Soviet officials feared an extensive Dashnak takeover in the Middle East, in order to transform it into the new worldwide centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Tchilingirian 2016). The Soviet schemes around the Catholicosate of Cilicia were also carefully monitored by the US State Department and the US Chargé d'Affaires in Beirut, who monitored the ecclesial developments and regularly briefed about the activities of the Lebanese Communists among the Armenian community (Stocker 2017).

Another serious reason of concern for the Soviet government was the outreach capacity of Gregory Peter XV Aghajanian, who had been elected Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church in 1937 and created Cardinal by Pope Pius XIII in 1946. An expert on the Soviet Union, Aghajanian opposed the repatriation project, claiming that a distinct Armenian identity and religious heritage could be preserved only outside the oppressive Communist rule. On the other hand, Soviet authorities and even *Etchmiadzin*, the official journal of the Apostolic Catholicosate of All Armenians, kept denouncing him as hostile, nationalist, and part of the 'Uniate' scheme deployed by the Vatican as a sort of 'Trojan horse' in order to allegedly attack both the Soviet state and the Orthodox and Oriental Churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Whooley 2016).¹²

When Karekin I died in 1952, the selection of the new Catholicos of Cilicia became a decisive matter for the Soviet officials, who wanted to prevent the total irrelevance of the See of Etchmiadzin and a full Dashnak takeover in Syria and Lebanon.

4 Conflicts around the Church between 1956 and 1958

The selection of a new Apostolic Catholicos of Cilicia was stalled from 1952 to 1956. The Dashnak held an overwhelming majority in the ecclesial committees and organs that, according to the Church statute, selected the electoral delegates that were supposed to choose among the candidates nominated by the clergy. The ensuing conflict between clergy and elected laity in the nomination process was

¹² As part of his project of revivification of the Armenian Catholic presence in Lebanon, Aghajanian launched in 1947 a periodical journal called *Massis*, with religious, literary, cultural and political content.

therefore first and foremost a political conflict among the Dashnak and their rivals in Lebanon, as well as between the Dashnak and the Soviet Union (Tchilingirian 2016).

On 30 September 1955, Vazgen I was enthroned as the new Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin. He announced an apostolic visit to Lebanon that was scheduled to take place in perfect timing with the date that had finally been chosen for the nomination of the new Catholicos of Cilicia. His presence was supposedly meant to reassert the connection, even if not on subordinate terms, between the two Apostolic Sees. On his arrival in Beirut, on 12 February 1956, Vazgen I was greeted by thousands of mainly Hunchak and Ramgavar supporters and officials, who denounced that the Dashnak were devising several irregularities in the forthcoming election. Vazgen I sensed his impotence in the process and, fearing that his further involvement in that quagmire could only lead to a net loss of his residual prestige, left Lebanon just before the scheduled selection of the new Catholicos of Cilicia (Stocker 2017).

Even with the boycott of the non-Dashnak members of the electoral college, a Dashnak-supported candidate was finally elected on 14 February 1956. The new Catholicos, Zareh I, was widely seen as very aligned with the Dashnak. On 5 March, a conclave of bishops was held in Cairo under the auspices of Vazgen I. The conclave deemed the selection of Zareh I as illegitimate on many levels, leading to a delay of the ceremony of consecration. On the other hand, the Catholicosate of Cilicia reacted with a declaration that insisted on its autonomy from Etchmiadzin, prompting what has been defined as both a national and an ecclesial crisis (Nalbantian 2013b). While not technically a schism within the Armenian Apostolic Church, the climate of tension between the two Holy Sees was accompanied by reciprocal accusations of being a puppet church serving a political patron. The See of Etchmiadzin was criticized from the Dashnak side for jeopardizing the national unity of the Armenians in Lebanon through an untenable claim of hierarchical supremacy that masked a complete surrender to Communism. The See of Cilicia was criticized from Etchmiadzin, the Soviet government, the Ramgavar and the Hunchak as having become little more than a Dashnak militia stronghold (Tashjian 2017).

The disappearance of a handful of precious relics, which were connected to the legitimacy of the See of Cilicia, became another issue of contention that exposed the involvement of several actors (Nalbantian 2013b). Even after the ceremony of consecration of Zareh I a group of clerics and laymen tried to establish an anti-Catholicosate either in Lebanon or in Syria, vying for political support in both countries and claiming that the proclamation in Antélias had not taken place in accordance with due canonical process. In the meantime, the newly elected Catholicos asserted his ecclesial jurisdiction on the important dioceses and prelatures of Greece, Cyprus, and Iran

(Tashjian 2017). The international relevance of the dispute, which had already been exposed by the unexpected involvement of Egypt in favour of Vazgen I and Etchmiadzin, is also clearly articulated in the documents and cables from the US Embassy in Beirut, which oscillated between the desire to reinforce Zareh I against pro-Soviet propaganda and the concern that an overt US declaration resulted in the Catholicos being painted as a pawn in the game of American imperialism in the region (Stocker 2017).

A photograph published on pro-Dashnak *Aztag* on 23 February 1956 shows the new Catholicos in full garb seated next to the Lebanese President Camille Chamoun, a fervent supporter of Lebanese isolationism and pro-Western foreign policy who despised progressive politics and was staunchly anti-Marxist (Aulas 1985).¹³ Zareh I also sought the support of the full support of Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, who had resumed power in 1955 after a six-year hiatus and a string of military coups.¹⁴ Despite his neutralist foreign policy, grounded in the opposition to the Baghdad Pact and the Truman Doctrine, al-Quwatli was concerned by the growth of the Syrian Communists under the expedient leadership of Khalid Bakdash (W.Z.L. 1957). The ecclesial crisis in the Catholicosate of Cilicia flared up precisely at the same time when al-Quwatli called for a national unity government in Syria, as a way to curtail the domestic challenge posed by the Communists and the Ba'ath Party. The Syrian President legitimized the election of Zareh I as a way to assert the relevance of the Syrian state and its institutions, even if that indirectly defied Lebanese sovereignty (Nalbantian 2013b).

While plans for the formation of an alternative diocese loyal to Etchmiadzin never materialized, the rift sparked by the choice of the new Catholicos became even more acute in the wake of the political turmoil that followed the Suez Crisis in October 1956 and the establishment of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria in February 1958. The 1957 general election in Lebanon was dominated by an increased polarization between the mainly Christian conservative camp, rallied around President Chamoun, and the pro-Nasserist opposition, headed by Prime Minister Rashid Karami

13 After he rose to political prominence during the French Mandate, Chamoun became a staunch defender of Lebanese nationalism and played a pivotal role in Maronite politics even after the end of his tenure as President of the Republic. He eventually became the chairman of the Lebanese Front coalition of Christian right-wing militias from 1976 to 1978 (Snider 1984).

14 Shukri al-Quwatli was one the leaders of the National Bloc (later rebranded as National Party), the main opposition movement against the French Mandate, and became the first President of independent Syria in October 1945 (Khoury 1987). Although a conservative on economic matters, al-Quwatli's foreign policy was strongly rooted in his aversion to the Hashemite monarchies in Jordan and Iraq.

and Kamal Jumblatt. In accordance with their visceral, shared anti-Communism, the Dashnak allied themselves with Chamoun, while the Hunchak and the Ramgavar sided with the lists backed by Karami and Jumblatt in the Beirut electoral constituencies. The intensity of the political conflict appears clearly from the narratives and the discourses deployed by the newspapers of the three Armenian parties (Krikorian 2007, 44), as well as from personal memories recollected in Burj Hammoud.

In May 1958, the hostility between the two political camps, which had opposing views about the place of Lebanon in the map of the world during the Cold War, eventually erupted in violent clashes in different parts of the country. A civil war and a possible Nasserist takeover was avoided when the Eisenhower administration opted for a military intervention, one day after the overthrow of the pro-Western monarchy in Iraq.¹⁵ The general crisis led to an outbreak of violence between the Dashnak and the Hunchak in various parts of Beirut and Burj Hammoud, with armed clashes, assassinations, and denunciations of supposed traitors (Tashjian 2017). The Hunchak and the Ramgavar, who held Chamoun responsible for the Dashnak 'occupation' of the Catholicosate, seized control of Nor Hajin and Qobayat, on the western bank of Beirut River, while the Dashnak, who shared the same domestic political objectives of the President and hoped to boost their credentials at the US Embassy, consolidated their grip on Burj Hammoud (Geukjian 2007). The conflict marked the redefinition of some urban spaces in the Beirut metropolitan area as specifically Armenian spaces, and at the same time led to the spatial segregation of these neighbourhoods into two fiercely hostile camps, with conflicting claims over public places, streets, squares, worship places, creating distinct networks of assistance and socialization (Harboyan 1998, 84).¹⁶

The power struggle among the different factions was accompanied by a process of construction of the Armenian 'other'. Even after the end of violent clashes, Armenian parties continued to perceive and define each other through the image of the internal enemy (Nalbantian 2013c). This process was hardly exceptional in the Leba-

15 The crisis ended with a political compromise that allowed the election of Fouad Chehab, then Commander-in-chief of Lebanese Armed Forces, as President, and the return of Karami as Prime Minister.

16 The spatial dimension of the intra-Armenian conflict was intensified by the location of the Armenian-majority areas in the periurban 'misery belt' that spanned on the edge of Beirut urban area. Burj Hammoud, in particular, was positioned at the crossroads between the port area and the Palestinian and Shi'i-majority areas of Nabaa and Tell al-Zaatar along the north-south axis, and between the stronghold of Achrafieh in East Beirut and the Christian hinterland of Mount Lebanon along the west-east axis (Kassir 2011, 492).

nese context, where practices of political mobilization often capitalized on discourses of territory, historical legitimacy, belonging, and identity. Tropes of communal resilience, perseverance, and steadfastness were commonly juxtaposed to the dehumanized, savage, cruel, beastly nature of the enemy. Equally common were the images that depicted internal dissent as betrayal or cooperation with the enemy (Maasri 2009). The process of othering and rebordering the Armenian public sphere caused long-lasting resentment.

5 Third Parties and Positive Neutrality

In the wake of the effort at détente inaugurated by the new President Chehab, several moderate intellectuals tried with limited success to heal the breach among the competing Armenian factions.

The journal *Spurk*, directed by Simon Simonian, was relaunched in February 1959 with the intention of providing a third, independent voice to the Armenian readership in Lebanon. Simonian and other op-ed writers argued that the Armenian parties had behaved out of selfish interest and in a deceptive manner, manipulating the great majority of their followers. *Spurk* criticized the interference of ‘dirty’ politics in church affairs and called for a negotiated solution through a summit meeting in order to address the crisis between the See of Cilicia and Etchmiadzin. The journal also argued that intensified cultural ties, based on a shared heritage, could strengthen the relationship between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora in the Middle East (Tashjian 2017). This goal was partly achieved, although one might question the rather naïve assumption that these cultural relations were devoid of political interference from the Soviet side, or of their exploitation in diplomatic relations. The emergence of an Armenian third force in the Lebanese political landscape was largely less successful. The electoral system, with recurrent instances of gerrymandering, favoured volatile coalitions based on pure expediency, and discouraged unaffiliated candidates.¹⁷ At the time of casting votes, some of the third force proponents leaned to the right wing led by the Phalanges, while others sided with the left-leaning Hunchak.

In 1963 Khoren I became the new Catholicos of Cilicia. The subsidence of the tensions related to the choice of the previous Catholicos helped to put animosities on hold in the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in April 1965. As was the case for other denominations in Lebanon, these years were marked

¹⁷ Thanks to their alliance with the Christian right wing, all seats reserved for the Armenians in the Lebanese parliament were Dashnak members or supporters from 1953 to 1972 (Geukjian 2009).

by huge social transformation and intense ideological mobilization. Lebanese politics became increasingly defined by sharply opposing views on the issue of Palestinian armed militancy and the sustainability of the sectarian power-sharing formula. Many Armenians, disillusioned with pan-Armenian nationalist rhetoric, often leaned towards non-Armenian parties, either to the Phalanges Christian right wing or to the pro-Palestinian revolutionary left, framing their militancy in ideological rather than in confessional or ethnic terms (Harboyan 1998, 102). The political discourse, even among the Armenians, was dominated by the volatile developments in the regional environment, the Palestinian question and its repercussions on Lebanon, and the future of the sectarian power-sharing formula. While many political actors challenged sectarianism for the sake of reapportioning parliamentary seats and influential positions of power, leftist groups advocated a radical overhaul of the entire system.¹⁸

In the wake of the deterioration of the security situation in Lebanon after the 1968 parliamentary election and the rising confrontation between the Lebanese army and Palestinian paramilitary groups, all the Armenian factions held meetings in order to envisage a common strategy, protect the Armenian areas, and improve ecclesial relations between the See of Cilicia and Etchmiadzin.

Anticipating the future outbreak of the civil war, the Armenian parties and members of Parliament established in 1974 a joint committee for the protection of Armenian-majority areas and the management of basic needs through street-level offices (Nucho 2016). The doctrine of 'positive neutrality' (*drakan čězok'ut'iun*) emerged because almost all Armenian leaders appeared aware of the potentially catastrophic consequences of a sequel of the 1958 crisis for the very survival of the Armenian presence in Lebanon (Geukjian 2007).

Except for the Communists and the pro-Palestinian revolutionary leftists, many Armenian leaders upheld their loyalty to the sectarian power-sharing system, rejected calls for radical secularization, and reiterated an image of Lebanon as a safe haven for persecuted

18 The relation with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestine Liberation Organization was especially crucial for Hagop Hagopian and the establishment of the militant Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia in 1975. This connection should not be seen as particularly surprising in the political context of the early 1970s, when the Palestinian cause was not framed in confessional terms, and was often defined as part of a much wider pan-Arab and anti-colonial revolutionary mobilization. The surge of radical left-wing nationalism in the Middle East, with its adoption of the Maoist strategy of 'people's war' and similar experiences of guerrilla warfare in Indochina and Latin America, and its different interpretations of the relation between Marxism and nationalism in postcolonial contexts, is thoroughly debated in the historiography of the Middle East but clearly outside the scope of this article.

minorities,¹⁹ in line with the Christian right wing (Snider 1984). However, the same leaders rejected the idea of a partition of the country, and the prospect of being swallowed into a Maronite canton in the overwhelmingly Christian hinterland north of Beirut (Aulas 1985). Caught in a classical security dilemma, the Armenian parties decided to avoid an escalation of the military confrontation with neighbouring Palestinian militias, even if that meant the hostility of the Lebanese Front and their former ally Chamoun, who felt betrayed by the Dashnak. According to Geukjian (2007), the term 'neutrality' is possibly misleading because the Armenian factions were lightly armed in order to patrol the territories they perceived as their own (mainly Burj Hammoud and Nor Hajin), while trying to maintain channels of negotiation among some of the warring sides. This uneasy armed neutrality was often misunderstood and did not effectively insulate the Armenian areas from external shelling and subconflicts, such as the confrontation between the right-wing Lebanese Front and the Syrian troops of the Arab Deterrent Forces in early 1978.

The position of the churches in this period was particularly delicate. The Armenian Catholic Church had its new Patriarch in July 1976, when Hemaïag Peter XVII, formerly the abbot of the Mekhitarist order in Venice, succeeded to Ignatius Peter XVI. The new Patriarch had to move among the stances of the other Eastern-rite Catholic Churches and the Vatican, which were hard to reconcile. The Greek Catholic Church often expressed pro-Palestinian positions.²⁰ The Maronite Church was bitterly divided between the Patriarch Anthony Peter Khoreish, who called for moderation and a political settlement of the Lebanese crisis, and the monastic orders, which not only provided ideological support to the Christian right wing, but also actively participated in the conflict, and sometimes even joined the most hard-line militias. The Vatican, which prized Lebanon as a cornerstone of its political map of the Middle East, was extremely disappointed by the diffusion of extreme nationalism among the Maronite lower ranks and sent high-level envoys in order to enforce stricter hierarchical discipline and call for religious coexistence and the respect of Lebanese sovereignty (Henley 2008). Under the papacy of Paul VI and especially John Paul II, the Armenian Catholic Church tried to contribute to the strategy of moderation supported by the

19 The theory of the 'mountain refuge', originally formulated by Henri Lammens and based on the assumption that Mount Lebanon had historically been a place of safety for Christian minorities, was a recurrent theme in Lebanese Christian nationalist narratives. It entailed claims of historical continuity, rootedness, and insulation from the rest of the Middle East (Salibi 1988, 130-50).

20 The Melkite or Greek Catholic Church is the Arabic-speaking, Byzantine-rite Catholic Church that is widespread in historical Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, with its headquarters in Damascus.

Vatican diplomacy. The attempts at achieving reconciliation and a negotiated settlement of the conflict could not prevent the interne-cine warfare among competing Christian sides in 1989, which pitted the Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea against the Lebanese army units loyal to Michel Aoun (Geukjian 2007).²¹

In the Armenian Apostolic Church, the situation was complicated by the poor health conditions of Catholicos Khoren I, who was supported by Karekin Sarkissian as coadjutor in 1977. The latter was elected as the next Catholicos in 1983 under the name Karekin II of Cilicia. According to Migliorino (2008), the new Catholicos relentlessly expressed his wish for an end of the hostilities, but strived to maintain a cautious stance amidst the competing Lebanese factions and the Syrian government, particularly because he did not want to jeopardize the status of the Armenian community in Syria under the rule of Hafez al-Assad. Karekin II preferred to focus on a reform of the Armenian Apostolic system of education and clerical training, which arguably tried to preserve the pivotal role of the Holy See of Cilicia in the complex relationship between the Armenian communities of Lebanon and Syria, the worldwide diaspora, and the Syrian government. While the official line of the Holy See was centred on neutrality, a much more proactive role was played by Khatchig Babikian, who served on the Central Executive Council of the Catholicosate, but had also been a Dashnak-leaning parliamentarian since 1957 and holder of influential ministerial posts in several cabinets since 1960. In his double ecclesial and institutional role, Babikian maintained effective connections with the Armenian diaspora outside Lebanon and served as a prominent associate of the negotiation committee created by Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Peter Sfeir after his appointment in 1986 (Geukjian 2014).

Karekin II also invested heavily in pastoral visits and ecumenical dialogue, particularly through his role in the Middle Eastern Council of Churches.²² The 1988 earthquake relief operations, the Karabagh question, and the independence of post-Soviet Armenia, fostered the full normalization of the relations between the See of Cilicia and Etchmiadzin, where Karekin II of Cilicia was elected in 1994 as Catholicos of All Armenians under the name Karekin I.

The new Catholicos of Cilicia, Aram II, upheld a policy of ecumenical dialogue, but could not stop the return to political polarization

21 The 'War of Liberation' launched by Michel Aoun (at that time Commander of Lebanese Armed Forces, and currently President of the Republic) is generally considered as the final stage of the civil war in Lebanon and resulted in Aoun being ousted from power, while Syrian troops assumed control over most of Lebanon and started to implement the Ta'if Agreement.

22 Founded in 1974, the Middle Eastern Council of Churches includes nearly all Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Evangelical, and Catholic Churches of the Middle East.

among Armenian parties in the Lebanese post-war landscape. Paradoxically, the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which revamped the power-sharing formula and granted more seats to Armenian Apostolic community, created new tensions as it eroded the hegemony of the Dashnak and exposed contrasting strategies. In the first post-war parliamentary election in 1992, Dashnak, Hunchak, and Ramgavar failed to reach a compromise over the composition of electoral lists, prompting the latter to boycott the poll. The political fragmentation of the Armenians of Lebanon was aggravated by the strategies of the Syrian security apparatus and by Yervant Melkonian, the ambassador of the newborn Republic of Armenia, who pressured Hunchak and Ramgavar to reestablish their alliance in order to weaken the Dashnak, at that time engaged in a tense confrontation with Armenia's President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Finally, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was determined to avoid the formation of an Armenian bloc in parliament, and resorted to handpicking his own Armenian candidates for the electoral lists in the Beirut constituency. The increasing tension between Rafiq al-Hariri and the Dashnak eventually prompted Aram II to use his moral suasion and warn all Armenian candidates that communal interests should be placed above personal and partisan ones, in order to spare the Armenian community from further divisions (Geukjian 2009).²³

6 Conclusions

The Armenian clergy did not play an overarching role in Lebanese politics because of its historical constraints, the mode of settlement of the Armenians in Lebanon after World War I, and the establishment of Armenian parties based on mass participation and high ideological mobilization. Rather than a proactive subject leading conflict management strategies, the Armenian Churches in particular the Apostolic Great House of Cilicia) became a site of conflict among local and international actors who saw ecclesial organs as instruments for their strategies and dissemination of propaganda. The 1956 church elections in the See of Cilicia were a particularly prominent example of the fight among rival non-state actors and states. Rela-

23 In the 2000 parliamentary election, the Hunchak and Ramgavar sided with Rafiq al-Hariri, who overwhelmingly won in Beirut and defeated the Dashnak, who were then aligned with pro-Syrian President Émile Lahoud. After the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, the sharp polarization of the Lebanese arena (on political rather than purely sectarian grounds) left a profound impact on the Armenian public sphere, with the Hunchak and Ramgavar siding with the pro-USA, anti-Syrian 'March 14' coalition, and the Dashnak firmly siding with Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, which later formed a coalition with Hezbollah and the pro-Syrian 'March 8' coalition.

tions among the Armenian Churches were therefore largely a reflection of the shifting political dynamics among the Armenian parties, or between the Soviet government and the diaspora. At best, the Armenian Churches tried to reduce the level of animosity among competing factions through a discourse of national unity and shared heritage. In their position as protectors of Armenian identity, culture, and language, the Churches navigated among internal frictions and external pressures, yet managed to maintain a unifying role between the Armenians of Lebanon (and Syria), the worldwide diaspora, and public institutions.

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