

# The Armenian Genocide, Maronite Starvation, and the Lessons in Past Atrocities

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Brief Analysis

## In addition to the Armenian genocide, the world should recognize the forced starvation of Lebanon's Maronites during the First World War.

In contrast to former U.S. presidents who shied away from recognizing the Armenian genocide, President Joe Biden issued a statement last month saying, “the American people honor all those Armenians who perished in the genocide that began 106 years ago today... We see that pain. We affirm the history. We do this not to cast blame but to ensure that what happened is never repeated.”

No doubt, this long overdue recognition of the Armenian genocide by a major world power brought relief to a nation where the lack of this recognition has played a role in inspiring further atrocities across the world. Adolf Hitler reportedly justified the impunity with which he planned to exterminate the Jews by stating “Who, after all, speaks today about the annihilation of the Armenians?”

However, the belated U.S. recognition of this genocide committed during the First World War also highlights that there are still scars on the collective memories of other peoples who faced extermination during this period and who continue to see their historic tragedies go unrecognized, their pain unfelt, and their future unsecured. The Maronite Catholic community of Lebanon is one such people.

The Maronite community is one of the oldest Christian communities in the Middle East. According to the father of Maronite historiography, Istifan al-Duwayhi, the Maronite Church has continuously upheld the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church since the council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, which repudiated the Eastern Orthodox Monophysite notion of a single nature in Christ and emphasized the unity of divine and human persons in Christ.

Throughout this long history, Maronites have faced differing levels of marginalization and violence. From 517 CE until the 1860s, Maronite communities in Lebanon experienced periods of peace punctuated by targeted taxation,

violent slaughter, and bloody internal tensions. Such moments of persecution pushed the Maronites to find sanctuary in the region of Mount Lebanon, which has since served as their haven and home since the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This marginalization likewise pushed the Maronites to establish a strong relationship with France dating back to the period of the Crusades—in 1250, French King Louis IX referred to the Maronites as “part of the French nation” in a letter written after the Maronites welcomed French crusaders. France came to view the Maronites as France’s “children” and Maronites saw France as *La mère du Liban*.

Despite centuries of tribulations, the First World War likely marks the most trying period of Maronite history. This moment is still recent enough to live in the political conscience of many Lebanese Maronites. During the war, the Ottomans, who controlled Lebanon at the time, worried about the potential for France and Britain to invade the eastern Mediterranean coast—with local Christian cooperation.

As such, the Ottomans were highly suspicious of the Maronites and their contact with France. As a result, Jamal Pasha—the Military Governor of Greater Syria and one of the orchestrators of the Armenian genocide, also known by his moniker Jamal al-Saffah (the Bloodthirsty)—abolished the autonomous region of Mount Lebanon within the Ottoman Empire, introduced martial law, and deployed thousands of Ottoman troops in Mount Lebanon early in the war. Jamal Pasha deeply distrusted Maronite patriarch Elias al Huwayek and the Maronites more generally, and this distrust would lead to a series of devastating actions.

One critical blow was the expulsion of British, French, and Russian nationals and missionaries from Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Most had worked in the educational or medical fields, and their departure gutted many of the foundational social services in Maronite communities. Furthermore, in March 1915, Father Youssef al Hayek was arrested for communicating with Paul Deschanel, then President of the French Chamber of Deputies. Jamal Pasha ordered his execution by hanging, sending a stern message to the Maronite Church that any correspondence with Entente powers would be seen as treason and penalized by capital punishment.

Yet the most devastating measure taken against the Maronites was Jamal Pasha’s blockade of Mount Lebanon. Early in the war, Jamal Pasha cordoned off Mount Lebanon from the Bekaa Valley, the breadbasket of Lebanon, along with Beirut, Palestine, and Syria. His blockade of Mount Lebanon was both a response to the Entente’s blockade of the coastal region of Greater Syria and a reflection of the growth in his distrust of Maronites.

As a result, all supply lines to Mount Lebanon were cut off, resulting in a severe food shortage. The deployment of Ottoman troops not only exacerbated the food shortage, but also disrupted individual and communal attempts to smuggle food into Mount Lebanon. To make matters worse, Mount Lebanon came under a swarm of desert locusts during the same period. The locusts finished off whatever was left of the region’s collapsing sericulture industry, normally the mainstay of Mount Lebanon’s economy.

Maronite and other Mount Lebanon communities had little if any food or resources at this point, relying only on the trickle of smuggled foodstuffs. The Maronite Church offered as much help as it could to starving families across sectarian lines. And whereas communication with France had remained informal during the beginning of the war, the church began to firmly align itself with France during the blockade. The Maronite patriarch appointed Father Boulos Akl as the go-between with French intelligence operatives, and French intelligence established headquarters in the island of Arwad off the Syrian coast. Meanwhile, despite the harsh conditions in Mount Lebanon, the patriarch welcomed Armenian survivors of Ottoman atrocities, defiantly declaring, “the piece of bread that we have, we will share it with our Armenian brothers.” Unfortunately, the Ottomans tightened the blockade further and whisked away able-bodied Maronites to work in Ottoman labor camps.

As the war progressed, the Ottoman military position began to deteriorate, and Jamal Pasha became concerned about feeding his own army. To ensure food for his troops, Jamal Pasha issued orders controlling the sale and

transport of essential grains such as wheat and barley. While loyalists had been permitted to purchase wheat and other grains from Hawran, in the Syrian interior, these new orders compelled farmers to sell grains they needed for their own consumption and prohibited the shipment of food from Beirut or Hawran to Mount Lebanon. Severe food shortages developed into a terrible famine. According to a French intelligence report, Jamal Pasha allegedly boasted: “We have rid ourselves of the Armenians by the sword. We shall do away with the Lebanese by famine.”

By the winter of 1916, famine was widespread in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Malnutrition helped the spread of cholera, malaria, dysentery, and influenza among local people. A chronic dearth of public healthcare facilities, coupled with a shortage of medicine, further exacerbated the ever-growing prevalence of illness. In October 1916, Father Akl sent an intelligence report to French officials on Arwad Island describing the overall condition in Beirut and Mount Lebanon: “There are no doctors, no medicine, no food, and no people to bury the dead.”

Among the first news outlets to take note of the famine was the *New York Times*, which featured an article on September 16, 1916 based on an American woman’s reportage. Illustrating images of misery, starvation, and death, the article read, “We passed women and children lying by the roadside with closed eyes and ghastly pale faces. It was a common thing to find people searching garbage heaps for orange peels or other refuse, and eating it greedily when found. Everywhere women could be seen seeking edible weeds among the grass along the roads.”

Jesuit fathers were more emphatic in their description of the famine. Their memoirs, housed at Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut, reveal that the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon and Beirut were reduced to searching trash and even animal excrement for vestiges of food. The dead lay unburied and cases of cannibalism were reported.

By the time Entente powers had occupied Beirut and Mount Lebanon in October 1918, dozens of villages were reduced to rubble and almost one third of the population of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, or approximately 175,000 Lebanese, had perished.

It’s debatable whether Ottoman authorities actually envisioned an engineered extermination of the Maronites. There were neither coded Ottoman instructions to murder Maronites en masse nor a *fatwa* by religious authorities to attack Maronites, as there had been for the Armenians. Nevertheless, the result of Ottoman policies during the First World War was the mass killing of a majority Maronite population.

The Ottoman Empire would ultimately fall, and Lebanon’s Maronite community became a cornerstone of the modern state of Lebanon. However, the country’s challenges certainly continue, beset by internal and regional tribulations and facing an economic collapse that is threatening the food security of many Lebanese today.

Although some historians have written about the famine of Mount Lebanon, the event has largely gone unrecognized in contemporary political or social discourse outside of the Maronite community itself. Perhaps the history of the pain, suffering, and death visited on Mount Lebanon has been set aside in favor of the war’s bigger stories, or perhaps it has been hidden for political expediency. Nevertheless, at a time when Lebanon descends into an abyss of strife and pauperization, the history of the famine of Mount Lebanon at the hands of the Ottomans should be recognized by the international community as another atrocity of the First World War. The famine on Mount Lebanon is a tragic and living history for many Lebanese, and recognition of that history should act as a form of reconciliation and as a lesson against repeating the atrocities of the past.

Recognizing its painful history will also serve as a domestic and international warning of how politics of war can lead to needless slaughter, whether willingly or unwillingly. The recent U.S. recognition of the Armenian genocide should open up opportunities to acknowledge other atrocities from this period, including the pain and suffering Maronites experienced at the hands of the Ottomans during the same period. President Biden emphasized that the recognition of such events is “not to cast blame, but to ensure that what happened is never repeated.” The world should likewise recognize the plight of the Maronites in that effort. ❖

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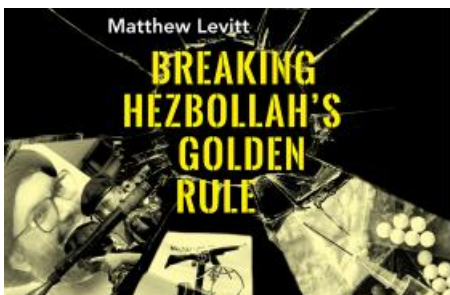
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