

The Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide: A Time for Reconsideration of Binary History

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Brief Analysis

April 24th commemorates the anniversary of the 1915 onset of events calculated to solve the Armenian problem of the Ottoman Empire. It is hard to consider the sequence of actions in which Ottoman authorities deliberately engaged — mass deportations, executions, and forced marches in hostile environments — and avoid the conclusion that the intent was indeed the permanent eradication of Armenians from their ancestral lands; that is, in modern terminology, genocide. It is up to Armenian societies, in their eponymous land and their diasporas, to seek the appropriate pursuit of justice, even after a century of international uncertainty and confusion. For Arab culture, it may also be a time of reflection.

Well into the 1980s, the account of the Armenian genocide in “progressive” Arab political culture was straightforward. The Turks, against whose heavy-handed oppression the Arabs had revolted in the course of WWI, are responsible for the genocide of Armenians. Always implicit in this assertion, sometimes even explicit, is a statement of supporting facts — that Armenia is part of the Soviet Union, the super-power that is sympathetic to Arab causes, and in particular supportive of the Palestinians, while Turkey, an ally of the United States, the primary sponsor of Israel, itself maintains cordial relations with Tel Aviv. The assassinations perpetrated by ASALA, the “Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia”, against Turkish diplomats were cast as legitimate actions of resistance of a global revolutionary movement, with factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization as its vanguard.

The Lebanese civil war had started in 1975 with an open confrontation of narratives: to the “right”, openly Christian militias presented the conflict as a war of survival for Christianity in the Middle East, while at the “left”, with some abundance of communist and secularist formations, sectarian concerns were dismissed as mere cover for the socio-economic privileges of elites. To the dismay of the leadership of other Lebanese Christians, the Armenian political parties in Lebanon — whether friendly or hostile to the Soviet Union — abstained from participation in the conflict, effectively endorsing the view of the “left”. A robust Palestinian-Armenian-Progressive account of history had coalesced, with clear identification of the parties of good and evil: Israelis, Imperialists, and Turks on the latter side, Arabs, Armenians — often with Kurds and Greeks — and the Soviets, on the former.

This was one example of history reforged to suit political expediency — convenient for mobilization and polemics, but patently blind to troubling facts. Such binary representations of good versus evil, changing as a function of the

political landscape, were and still are the norm in Arab political culture. In a later version, spanning from the late 1990s to the onset of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the “evil” Turk had metamorphosed into a “good” one, while the prior focus on Arab-Armenian brotherhood was de facto downgraded. In more recent installments, divergence can be noted in the assessment of the Turk in Arab political culture; the multiple opposed versions, however, maintain a binary characterization, with the Turk either as a “good” Muslim Sunni brother, or an “evil” neo-Ottoman tool of the United States, or an equally “evil” self-serving lackey of Russia. Lost in the many Turkish passions of Arab political culture is any serious consideration of the Armenian genocide and its place in the history of the region. Also lost is the non-binary Arab role in this tragedy.

Undoubtedly, the Ottomans – their Young Turk military elite that was to pave the way for the Turkish Republic – engineered and executed this genocide. Even when this fact is or was acknowledged, the uncomfortable truth that is almost always omitted is about the methods of the execution. The “progressive” account of the genocide highlights the fact that Armenian refugees were sheltered in Levantine Arab cities, and ultimately many of them settled in Lebanon, Syria, and beyond. Witness accounts from the period do point to instances in which Muslims, as well as Christians, saved Armenians from certain death. However, this is a selective reading of the record. The Ottomans committed genocide, in part, by imposing on the Armenians an arduous and lethal march in the Levantine wilderness, exposing them to predatory Arab and Kurdish tribes. The Armenians whom the elements spared fell often victims of raids by Kurds and Arabs. This is evidently not a wholesale indictment of all tribes and of all Muslims. The binary of the evil Turk and the good Arab (and later of the Kurd as a perpetual victim) is, however, to be questioned.

The momentary political necessities have shaped the narratives of the region into ones of pure victims and pure perpetrators. What is obfuscated in the process is the commonality and recurrence of deep brutality. Societies in the Arab East and beyond are denied the opportunity to face and learn from their recent cruel past, engaging instead in a diglossic discourse of public unity against the external enemy of the moment, and a private lament of sectarian victimization.

In 1970, a book, titled *A Brief Account of the Calamities of Christians (al-Qusara fi Nakbat al-Nasara)* compiled more than half a century prior, was republished in Lebanon. By then, Beirut, as a modern Arab metropole, insisted on an image of post-communitarian integration that such a book would have inconvenienced. Since it recalled events that took place in today’s Southern Turkey and Northern Syria, and lacked a consistent adherence to chronology, it was largely ignored. But it is indeed the impromptu and idiosyncratic character that owes it careful attention. To the best of the availability of his receding sources, the anonymous author describes how, in town after town, the Christian population was left helpless to the abuse by increasingly aggressive authorities, abandoned by most Muslim neighbors, and fallen victim to attacks by tribes, Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. Instead of informing the public discourse of the common problematic history that has to be addressed, this book served solely as further fuel for the fear and sense of victimization among some Christians.

The hidden fear of the vulnerable in the region is solemnly justifiable. Spanning earlier into the events of the 1840 to 1860 in Mount Lebanon and Damascus, or the murderous “Hamidian” campaigns against Armenians and other Anatolian Christians in the 1890s, through the massacre of Iraqi Assyrians in 1933, the anti-Jewish Farhud in 1941 in Baghdad, and into the horrors of Lebanese civil war, where isolated communities, Muslim and Christian, suffered massacres with blatantly medieval brutality, the Iran-Iraq war of human attrition in the 1980s, the subsequent chemical attacks and the Anfal genocidal operations against the Kurds in Iraq, the historical stage is set in which the recent depravity of the Syrian regime and the “Islamic State” are not anomalies but further demonstrations of a recurrent reality.

One of the many uses of the Palestinian plight has been to enable an unethical silence across the region. Any

consideration of traumatic events still in the collective memory, such as the Black Decade in Algeria, or of the Darfur genocide in Sudan, is met with disapproval and accused of diluting the focus on the responsibility of Israel for Palestinian suffering. The most recent, and most obscene, incarnation of this approach is in Syria, where the current insistence of many in the “progressive” camp is on refusing to let this affair of nearly one million killed, twelve million displaced, and a country devastated by utter horror, stand in the way of recriminating Israel and its ally the United States for ignoring Palestinian rights.

Both the revisionist denial of the series of historical instances of horror and the unethical silence on current crimes reveal the lack of value assigned to the victims of these assaults on human rights — including Palestinians, whose mistreatment by the Syrian regime in the Yarmuk refugee camp near Damascus amounted to further war crimes. History is used instead as a toolkit for passionate polemics, with highlighted selections serving political arguments.

In the Armenians, Arab political culture has an interlocutor that it has never been able to fault. No party of the many warring factions of this culture has accused the collective Armenians of any wrong-doing against Arab causes. The Armenian genocide may have lost the highlight it was granted when Israel-friendly Turkey was the desired target; however, it has not been maligned. Were it to survive the inevitable accusation of being a diversion, it may thus be an appropriate subject for Arab and Kurdish cultures to revisit in a self-examination of the brutal character of a non-binary past. ❖

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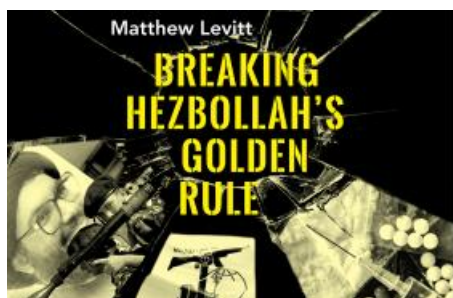
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