

The Representation of the Lebanese Armenian Diaspora in the Lebanese Print Media (2000-Present)

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Abstract

The Lebanese Armenian diaspora (LAD) has tried to preserve its Armenian identity, culture, traditions, and communal solidarity to prevent assimilation in the host society. Previous research has not addressed the issue of representation of the LAD in local media. The Lebanese political system and the opportunity structure have enabled the LAD to establish social, cultural, religious, and political organizations to maintain its particularities and participate in politics. The Armenian community has adopted a communalist strategy to promote its interests and protect its rights. We argue that on different occasions and events, such as during elections, the media quickly picked up on and sensationalized certain reports that represent the Armenians in a negative light, in an attempt to present the community as indifferent to Lebanon's national interests. This article aims to examine how the local media represented the LAD when the political choices of the community did not converge with the interests and the policies of other Lebanese groups.

Keywords

Armenians, diaspora, media, Lebanon, identity, Politics

Profile, Short History and Methodology

THE LEBANESE ARMENIAN DIASPORA (HENCEFORTH LAD) HAS tried to protect Armenian national identity in the host country in the

post-genocide period. Diasporic communities such as the LAD were founded on shared narratives of traumatic historical experiences and are therefore concerned with maintaining their identity in host societies. Rogers Brubaker contends that diasporas are dispersed communities that share space with a host society but are simultaneously oriented toward a distant homeland.¹ Sossie Kasbarian argues that for the Armenian diaspora the genocide of 1915 is widely recognized as the defining and foundational narrative that explains its coming into being, as well as its trajectory in time and place.² Armenian communities in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States have their particularities—no diaspora is monolithic. Yet, the Armenians are often determined to maintain their inherited culture, language, and collective identity, while participating in mainstream educational, political, and economic institutions. Where the opportunity structure permitted, they qualified for citizenship and accepted their duties and responsibilities, cultivating a sense of belonging to their adopted countries.

We define the LAD as a segment of the Armenian people residing permanently in Lebanon, an ethno-national state-linked diaspora. Khachig Tololyan explained that “the post-genocide diaspora was to think of itself as exilic, existing provisionally, for an uncertain period of time, awaiting the return to the homeland. While it waited, it had to engage in an organized struggle to sustain Armenian identity.”³ Like other historical ethno-national diasporas, the LAD has been a collectivity whose core members’ identity is anchored in clear symbolic foundations. These include a common language, shared historical memories, common ancestry, biological connections, a discernible degree of national solidarity, and shared cultural and behavioral patterns. Undoubtedly, the LAD’s identity and behavior were also influenced by instrumental factors, such as the impact of globalization, economic considerations, seeking jobs, opening businesses, the local popular culture, political events through the local mass media, and self-perceived national needs and interests.

Thus, as Gabriel Sheffer has noted, these collective symbolic characteristics and the instrumental factors contributed to “recurrent transformations in the nature and patterns of activity” of the LAD, including its position and activities regarding politics in general and

the politics of Lebanese groups in particular.⁴ Still, these essential formative factors fixed the identification patterns, the overall strategy that the LAD adopted in Lebanon, the establishment of its socio-economic, cultural, and political organizations, and its trans-state networks, which aimed to protect and promote its cultural, economic, and political interests in the host country.

The foundations of the LAD grew as a result of two migration waves. The first occurred after World War I, when approximately forty thousand Armenians, the majority of whom hailed from Cilicia, settled in Beirut and the northern region of Mount Lebanon. These refugees settled mainly in Beirut's Medawar and Quarantina areas. The second wave reached Lebanon between 1937 and 1939, when approximately fifteen thousand Armenians arrived after the French mandatory government ceded the Alexandretta *sanjak* to Turkey. These Armenians settled in the Bekaa valley, especially in the city of Anjar, as well as in Tyre in southern Lebanon.⁵ In addition to these two migratory waves, nearly five thousand Armenians reached Lebanon from Palestine in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and the expulsions that followed.⁶ Those Armenians who found refuge in Lebanon were settled in refugee camps. The majority chose to remain a separate community rather than be absorbed into the host society and disappear as a recognizable entity. This ethno-national identity, as John Armstrong notes, "found a more intense focus of distinctiveness in its particular religion."⁷ According to the stipulations of the Treaty of Lausanne, the French mandatory authorities granted Lebanese citizenship to the Armenians on August 31, 1924 "to buoy the country's Christian populations."⁸ Immediately thereafter, the French and their allies "reinforced and expanded the political spaces reserved for the Armenians in the new confessional system being established in Lebanon."⁹ The Armenians accepted the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, cultivating a sense of belonging to their adopted country. French policy was criticized by Lebanese Muslims because Armenians contributed to the sustenance of a Christian predominance in Lebanese society. Hostility towards the Armenians also stemmed from performing a middleman function in the host society. Armenians were prominent in trade and commerce, skilled craftsmen, made achievements in various professions, and

were often economically successful. Lebanese Christians, particularly Maronites, supported and defended the Armenian presence because they considered the latter “a significant factor for the preservation of their dominant power in the country.”¹⁰

Over the years the Armenian community became an integral part of Lebanon’s diverse demographic and political landscape. The opportunity structure in the host country helped the LAD to adopt a communalist strategy, which was intended to ensure its own needs and prevent assimilation in the host society. Moreover, as William Safran stressed, the purpose was to maintain Armenian ethnicity through “communalistic and semi-autonomous institutions as was reflected in the Armenian Apostolic church.”¹¹ The aim of the communalist strategy was defending the LAD and organizing the community’s relations with the host society, the homeland, and other segments of the Armenian diaspora. The Armenians connected politically and economically to the national mainstream, while maintaining their separate religious tradition. The community achieved not only economic success, but also political recognition. The Armenians established their political parties and were represented in all the cabinets, parliaments, and government agencies.

Dalia Abdelhady argues that “claiming a narrative of ethnic identification is a characteristic of diasporic communities that is central to their maintenance over time.”¹² According to Milton J. Esman, diaspora communities that have a distinctive religious tradition are prone to adopt “a dual or hybrid identity.” Still, “their members adopt a mainstream political identity and participate actively in its institutions, while preserving an attachment to their inherited religious traditions and practices.”¹³ Unlike earlier generations of Armenians, the youth felt not only Armenian but also Lebanese. They spoke Arabic fluently and they were also keenly aware of the role they should play in defending Lebanon’s particularities and future. In an article in the Lebanese daily newspaper *Al-Nahar*, Pascal Azar explored how Armenian youth articulated their dual identity and belonging to Lebanon. Marian Khachadourian told Azar “I am Lebanese more than being Armenian. Lebanon is my country and Armenia is knowledge.” Another interviewee, Hovig Demirjian, expressed similar views when asked about his identity and belonging. Demirjian said “I am Lebanese before

being Armenian” and that he “never” wishes to return to Armenia. Armenia and the genocide “are memories in our everyday lives. Yet, we are Lebanese and we cannot leave our country and return to Armenia.”¹⁴ Evidently, diasporic conceptions of identity and community allow members of a diaspora to identify and force a rethinking of belonging as a two-way process involving the homeland and the host society.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Armenians established their political institutions in Lebanon. The three Armenian political parties, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), or simply Tashnags, the Social Democratic Hunchagian party, or simply Hunchags, and the Democratic Liberal Ramgavar party, or simply Ramgavars aimed to preserve Armenian national identity by fostering its culture, ensuring that Armenians remained loyal and dutiful citizens in Lebanon, as well as the Armenian diaspora. As a matter of fact, the establishment of political parties, specialized organizations, and local communal organizations enabled the LAD to play pivotal political and economic roles in Lebanon. The political parties performed essential functions that influenced the ways the Armenian community was represented in the media. The political choices and the functions of the political parties are relevant to the analysis in this research.

The Lebanese political system based on confessional power-sharing recognized the rights of various communities. The Armenians, like other Lebanese groups, were granted legitimate access to political institutions, and played critical roles in domestic affairs. Hence, the Armenian parties served as the major structures and channels for political participation, while nurturing socio-economic ventures. The Tai'f Agreement of 1989, that ended the Lebanese Civil War, recognized the Armenians as one of the seven major communities in the country. The government and mainstream society tolerated pluralism and respected diversity as a permanent arrangement. Hence, the government provided the Armenian community radio and TV outlets, cultural events, and political outlets (political parties and clubs).¹⁵

Although the Armenian community is well integrated into the Lebanese system, it has a life of its own, and the leadership of the community avoided being associated with Lebanese parties in intra-state conflicts. Lavie Samdar and Ted Swedenburg explained

diasporic identification as a process involving an active search for one's rootedness and a heightened awareness of being transitory.¹⁶ Accordingly, members of the Armenian community are constantly involved in processes of association and disassociation in both the homeland and the host society. Traditionally, the Armenian political leadership stood with the government. For example, during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1989) the Armenian political leadership adopted a policy of positive neutrality and defended state institutions.¹⁷ The adoption of positive neutrality did not mean that the Armenians did not have a position or a political opinion concerning all Lebanese communal issues. The decision makers behind this policy wanted to steer clear of taking sides with any of the warring Lebanese parties and avoid potential Armenian intra-communal violence. As time passed, and the civil war unfolded, Lebanese Muslim and Christian politicians acknowledged and accepted the neutrality of the LAD. For example, Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), tried to mend fences with the Tashnag party and he described the Armenians saying:

But much to the dismay of the isolationists, the Armenians had refused to take part in this fratricidal war we had just been through; their attitude had remained truly liberal and patriotic. They showed that their own nationalism was fully compatible with their loyalty to Lebanon. They were a fine people, enterprising and very organized.¹⁸

The Armenian community was part and parcel of the Lebanese confessional political structure and it was unwise to remain aloof from key decisions concerning the socio-economic, cultural, and political rights of all groups. Armenian parliamentarians sought unity to resolve domestic disputes through dialogue and consensus and advocated that contested national issues could only be negotiated by peaceful means. The Armenians distanced themselves from Lebanese internal conflicts because they believed that sectarian strife, political power struggles, and social divisions were likely to cause further disintegration of Lebanese society. After 2000, the Armenian parties lost their neutrality by taking sides with various Lebanese parties for electoral purposes. For example, the Tashnag party, the strongest party, took sides joining the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Hizbullah-led alliance, and

the Hunchags and Ramgavars took sides with the Future Movement (al-Mustaqbal) because they wanted to nominate their candidates independently from the Tashnags. Hence, during parliamentary elections and on various significant events, the Armenians were criticized in the print and broadcast media either for their neutrality or for entering into alliances with other parties to safeguard their socio-economic and political rights, mainly the formation of an Armenian bloc in parliament to defend communal rights and influence policy making. Also, the Lebanese media would quickly pick up on a story or an event, sensationalizing it further, to represent the Armenian community in a negative and/or positive image depending on the choices of the political leadership of the community.

In Lebanon, the mainstream media (print, electronic, and broadcast) occasionally focused on the political, economic, and social involvement of the Armenian community in Lebanese society. This article will focus on the Arabic and English print media to demonstrate how the Armenians were represented by Lebanese journalists and politicians. We will highlight certain events like the issue of Turkey's participation in the peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon in 2006, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to the country in September 2010, the Metn by-elections in August 2007, the general elections in June 2009, and the potential threat of Syrian and Kurdish migrant workers to Armenian identity, to explore and analyze how the Armenians were represented in society. We adopt a qualitative methodology. Using discourse and content analysis we attempt to shed light on the views of Lebanese journalists and politicians with regard to the political choices of the LAD. We take account of the context in which a piece of discourse occurred. The main tool for the research was a collection of newspaper and other media articles in Arabic and English to describe and analyze Armenian representation in the Lebanese print media. We utilized newspapers like *Al-Nahar*, *Al-Safir*, *Al Mustaqbal*, *Al-Akhbar*, *Al-Diyar*, *Al-Sharq*, *Al-Anwar*, *Al-Liwaa*, *Al-Balad*, *Al-Itihad*, *Al-Joumhouria*, and *The Daily Star* to uncover stories and conceptions about the Armenian community. The aim is to analyze how the local media represented and viewed the LAD when the political choices of the community did not converge with the interests and the policies of the various Lebanese groups.

Diasporic Activism and Media Representation

In the aftermath of the Hizbullah-Israel war in August 2006, on September 5th, the Turkish parliament voted in favor of sending troops to Lebanon to join the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to contribute to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.¹⁹ Resolution 1701 was adopted on August 11, 2006 and, among other things, called for end of hostilities between Hizbullah and Israel, the deployment of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to southern Lebanon, parallel withdrawal of Israeli forces behind the Blue Line, and strengthening the UNIFIL to facilitate the entry of LAF in the region.²⁰ It could be argued that Ankara was determined to participate in what it considered “an urgent humanitarian cause.” Yet, Turkey, as a regional power, considered intervention as a “historic duty” to contribute to regional stability, and a means to boost Ankara’s influence and prestige in the Middle East.²¹ The Fouad Seniora government welcomed the deployment of the Turkish contingent to southern Lebanon without seeking consensus with the Armenian political leadership. Meanwhile, Armenian religious and lay leaders expressed anger and the Armenian political parties issued a communiqué expressing opposition to Turkey’s participation in peacekeeping because such decisions required national consensus. The communiqué emphasized that in May 2000 the Lebanese parliament recognized the Armenian Genocide and expressed “absolute support” of the demands of the community.²² Yet, the Seniora government did not respect the view of the community and did not sympathize with its demand to not accept Turkish participation in peacekeeping at a time when Armenian representatives had always sympathized with the demands of the various Lebanese sects. *Al-Akhbar* represented the Armenians as the “biggest diaspora in the Middle East” and referred to the stance of the leadership of the community, which considered the arrival of Turkish troops “humiliation to the collective memory of the Armenian people.”²³ This meant, as Volkan Vamik suggested that collective memories consisted of ‘chosen glories’ and ‘chosen traumas’ that were shared, selected, and subjective representations of historical events and figures, which maintain the community’s sense of self.²⁴ Hagop Pakradounian, a Tashnag parliamentarian, criticized

the government saying “we do not understand why the government was enthusiastic for them to come?”²⁵

He added, “Turkey was not a neutral country to participate in peacekeeping because Ankara had a military agreement with Israel.” Referring to the issue of disappearance of the Lebanese Shi’ite religious leader, Imam Musa al-Sadr, during an official visit to Libya in August 1978, Pakradounian asked “could Lebanon accept the deployment of Libyan peacekeepers?” Such a decision could be considered humiliation to the memory of the Shi’a community. He also accused the government of “marginalizing the Armenian community” and not respecting its particularities.²⁶ Armenian opposition to Turkish peacekeepers stemmed from Turkey’s continuous denial of the Armenian Genocide. In addition, Armenian activism attempted to influence the host government to act in favor of Armenian interests and respect the community’s stance, mainly because Armenians comprise an important segment of Lebanon’s plural society.

Within this context, the Foreign Minister of Lebanon, Fawzi Salloukh, during an official visit to Armenia in July 2006 emphasized that “Lebanon is proud of its Armenian citizens who have been considered an inseparable part of the country’s socio-political composition, and who have contributed to Lebanon’s flourishing.” Salloukh stressed that “Lebanon that respects all cultures and religions considers the Lebanese Armenians an added value.”²⁷ Also, in October 2017, on the occasion of inauguration of residential buildings in the Armenian quarter of Bourj Hammoud, Minister of Interior Nouhad el-Mashnouk emphasized that the “Lebanese Armenians are an added value” to the country. In his speech, el-Mashnouk stressed that “the Lebanese are proud of the achievements of the Armenians who arrived in Lebanon as refugees but after fifty years they transformed Bourj Hammoud to an urban area.”²⁸

In October 2006, the Tashnag party mobilized the Armenian youth and organized a huge demonstration in Beirut’s downtown Martyrs’ Square denouncing the presence of Turkish troops in the country. Choosing Martyrs’ Square had symbolic meaning because it was the place where Ottoman authorities persecuted a number of Lebanese during World War One. This borrowed from Terrence Lyons and Peter

Mandaville, who reiterated that diaspora groups as political actors and lobbying forces do play a role in the domestic and international politics of the countries in which they reside.²⁹ At the domestic level, the Tashnag party distributed leaflets around Beirut and organized a protest in the Armenian neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud calling on the Lebanese to support its position.³⁰ Bourj Hammoud remained the center of Armenian life in Lebanon. The media provided heavy coverage and analysis of the Armenian protests and viewed them in a political context. It is worth noting that the Greek Catholic community expressed solidarity with the Armenians and called on the other communities to support Armenian demands, concurrently asking the government to refrain from accepting the deployment of Turkish troops.³¹ In a critical essay titled *On the Road of New Thinking*, Samir Salha wrote that not only was the Lebanese government responsible for ignoring the demands of its “Armenian citizens” but also Armenian religious and political leaders were responsible because their stance was incompatible with the national interests of Lebanon. Salha considered the conflict over the deployment of the Turkish troops as an opportunity for the Seniora government, that “enjoyed popular support in Turkey,” and for Armenia and Turkey to start a “serious dialogue” to resolve their conflict over the Genocide.³² Hence, the Armenian quandary was a Lebanese internal matter and was a new opportunity for Lebanon to use its good offices “on the road of new thinking” to adopt and support “Armenian-Turkish dialogue and reconciliation.”³³

In 2010, once again the media reacted to Armenian peaceful protests and demonstrations against Erdogan’s official visit to Lebanon. On November 23rd, members of Armenian student and youth organizations gathered outside Beirut’s Rafik Hariri International Airport to protest Erdogan’s two day visit.³⁴ In addition to Armenian anti-Erdogan statements, the media highlighted remarks by prominent Lebanese Christians. For example, *Al-Mustaqbal* quoted the leader of the Maronite General Council, Wadih al-Khazen, addressing Erdogan “to adopt a historical stance by acknowledging the shameful act that his Ottoman predecessors committed against the Armenian people during World War One.”³⁵ Mobilized by the Armenian political parties, a number of angry protesters clashed with army troops during a huge

gathering in Beirut's Martyrs' Square. When the demonstrators tore up a large photo of Erdogan on a billboard and pelted troops with rocks, security forces responded by beating up several of them. The angry crowd chanted "Erdogan, leave us."³⁶ Referring to negative experiences of the Lebanese with Ottoman authorities, Pakradounian justified the forceful removal of Erdogan's photo saying that "putting it in front of the martyrs' statue was a humiliation to the Lebanese people and their martyrs."³⁷ Given the religious and sectarian divisions in Lebanon, a number of journalists considered the demonstrations a provocation to the Sunni community because Erdogan was a guest of the Sunni prime minister. Hence, the LAD was represented in the media in a negative image. Perhaps the Armenian protest was a source of embarrassment to the country's government. Yet, the Armenian political parties activated the LAD politically because Erdogan's visit was unfavorable to the interests of the community. Using ethnic language, Rayan Charbel wrote that "Lebanese Sunnis were at peace with neo-Ottomanism and had no historical hatreds towards the Ottoman colonial power that hanged Lebanese on May 6, 1916 in Martyrs' Square."³⁸ According to Charbel, the speeches delivered by Armenian politicians and party members at Martyrs' Square "reflected populism and unprecedented Armenian political immaturity that failed to convince Lebanese public opinion." The Armenians since their arrival in Lebanon had succeeded in winning the respect of all Lebanese sects, who supported their identity and cause. But "after engaging in narrow political games, they lost the support of many Christians and half of the Muslims."³⁹ Stemming from their communalist strategy, the Armenian parties had their reasons to mobilize the community. Compared to Charbel's representation, Mohamed Nour Eddine analyzed Erdogan's visit in a regional context and saw Turkey's role in Lebanon as preventing the spillover of the sectarian Sunni-Shi'a strife from Iraq to Lebanon. According to Nour Eddine, Erdogan's visit to Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, who is of Armenian descent, was a positive "message" to the LAD that "practiced its political rights and expressed its conviction."⁴⁰ Next, we turn to elections to demonstrate how the Armenians were represented in the media depending on their political choices

Elections and Media Representation

The August 5, 2007 Metn by-election over one parliamentary seat became a turning point for the Christian Phalange party and its pro-government allies to criticize the Tashnag alliance with the opposition and the leader of the FPM, Michel Aoun. Former President and pro-government candidate, Amin Gemayel, contested the seat that fell vacant when his son Pierre Gemayel was assassinated the prior November. It should be noted that as a result of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, and in light of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the Lebanese parties were vertically divided between March 8th and March 14th forces. March 8th was a coalition of opposition parties, including Hizbullah, affiliated with the Shi'a sect, and the Tashnags. March 14th was a coalition of parties in alignment with the Future Movement, affiliated with the Sunni sect and led by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated Rafik Hariri. The Tashnags claimed to have the support of eighty-five to ninety percent of Lebanon's Armenian community. Consequently, being the strongest and largest political party, the Tashnag stance apparently represented the stance of the LAD. Before supporting the opposition candidate, Camille Khoury, the Tashnags hoped to support a consensus candidate between the government and the opposition to avoid post-election backlash and intra-Christian divisions.⁴¹ Still, the Maronite Patriarch, Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, intensified his efforts to find a compromise between Aoun and Gemayel to avoid an electoral clash that would further divide the Christians.⁴² Both attempts by Sfeir and the Tashnag party were rejected by Gemayel because he took it for granted that he would win in order to continue the battle for "sovereignty and independence" from Syrian political influence that "was not over yet" as he said.⁴³ Aoun too was not less intransigent than Gemayel because he aimed to speak in the name of the Christians. In a big rally in Antelias, Gemayel warned his opponents that "Metn would never be a suburb of Damascus."⁴⁴ Gemayel manipulated anti-Syrian feelings to warn the people of Metn that a vote for Aoun was a vote for the return of Syrian tutelage. Yet, the Metn seat was lost to the opposition coalition's candidate, FPM member Camille Khoury. The matter for Gemayel was a presidential battle and determining which

Maronite political elite would represent the Christian community in the September 25th presidential election.

In the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, and in times of political turmoil, desperate Lebanese politicians employed tactics to demonize their rivals. Extremism and scapegoating became the tools of the trade, and the mass media were employed in partisan and propagandistic ways that further aggravated sectarian tensions. Aoun's return from exile in 2005 and his alliance with Hizbullah sparked the major intra-Christian tension that was again confirmed by the by-election in 2007. The impact of intra-Maronite rivalries between Aoun and Gemayel was negative on the Tashnags and the Armenian community in general. While Gemayel said that he had close ties with the Armenians, he accused the Tashnags of using 'unacceptable' election practices and questioned their alliance with Aoun. Gemayel also claimed that he was preparing a file on the forgeries committed by the Tashnags in the Armenian neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud.⁴⁵ Gabriel El-Murr, a former parliamentarian and the owner of Murr Television, widely known as MTV, was no less critical of the Tashnags than Gemayel. For his part, Aoun declared that his victory was a "national victory" and said, "I know the Armenians, we studied together and they were heroes in the army."⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, the FPM won support from the majority of Bourj Hammoud's Armenian electorate. Armenian voters were blamed by many non-Armenian Lebanese Christians who were unhappy with the results.

Democracy in Lebanon was an illusion where emotions, sectarian, and religious belonging ruled. Refraining from his negative attitudes towards the Armenians, El-Murr clarified in a televised interview that his comments targeted the Tashnag leadership and not the Armenian community. El-Murr, who used racist language and instigated sectarian strife, urged the Armenians to change the Tashnag leadership, and urged the Tashnag party to change the way it dealt with elections.⁴⁷ Still, Waleed Jumblatt, the leader of the PSP and an anti-Syrian politician, while saluting the neutral Armenians and those who never took part in the Lebanese Civil War, wished that "the Tashnag party took into consideration the right of the Lebanese people for self-determination to face the Syrian fascist regime and not forgotten the Armenian

Genocide.”⁴⁸ The racist statements made by El- Murr and Gemayel stemmed from their frustration with the result of the Metn by-election that was politicized. Their statements could be considered propaganda to prevent losing the support of their electorate. It is worth noting that Lebanese politicians praised the Armenian community and welcomed Armenian votes when they were in their favor and demonized the community when Armenian votes were cast against them. According to Pakradounian “it was unacceptable that some allow themselves to differentiate between Lebanese Armenian Christians and other Lebanese Christians, in view of the fact that Armenians adopted Christianity as a state religion one thousand seven-hundred years ago.”⁴⁹ Accusing the Armenians of racism was rejected by the community. In an interview, Bedig Dervartanian reiterated: “We felt that the Maronites did not like us, they called us intruders, like we were not Christians just because we were a different sect. Aoun did not look at people like Sunni, Shi’a, Maronite, he was patriotic.”⁵⁰ Dervartanian’s reference to a ‘different sect’ has a particular connotation because sectarianism, as Max Weiss noted, is “a way of being in the world that depends upon a set of cultural markers and social practices.”⁵¹

The speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri, expressed annoyance at what he described as ‘sectarian talk’ during the Metn by-election, pointing out that such discourse was shameful and represented a great danger to the country. Praising the role of the Armenians, Berri said: “the Armenians in Lebanon did not need to prove their nationalist credentials and their firm roots in this country.”⁵² Hizbullah too showed support and solidarity with the Armenian community. Hizbullah’s Loyalty to the Resistance parliamentary bloc expressed regret over the decline in the standards of political rhetoric, as well as racism and misrepresentation of the facts committed by the ruling majority. During a visit to Tashnag headquarters, Hizbullah politburo member Ghaleb abou Zeinab stressed that no one has the right to question the national identity of any Lebanese. Abou Zeinab added that “the Armenians deserved the right to make their own political choices, because they were not an isolated group as some would like to portray them to be. Every political party had the right to choose a political path.”⁵³ On August 9, 2007, to mend fences with the

Armenian community, Gemayel visited Armenian Catholicos Aram I at his summer residence in Bikfaya. Speaking to reporters, Gemayel acknowledged his firm political, economic, social, and cultural bonds with the community, which he said was dear to his heart. By pointing to the long and shared history of joint struggle between the Armenians and the Phalange party, Gemayel noted: "Let us not forget that the memorial to Armenian martyrs in Bikfaya is right next to the statue of Pierre Gemayel, the founder of the Phalange party." Concerning his previous remarks, Gemayel rejected the accusations that anything he said was improper or offensive to the Armenian community and emphasized that "some people confused what I said with what others said, that was not my problem."⁵⁴

Once again, in the June 2009 parliamentary elections when the Lebanese parties were vertically divided between the pro-Syrian March 8th forces and pro-independence March 14th forces that took shape after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, anti-Armenian statements were expressed by some March 14th politicians.⁵⁵ The perception that Armenians were against the March 14th ruling majority forces sparked hot debates in the media. Borrowing from Esman, apparently, "the host-government" called on the "resident diaspora to support its strategic goals" and adjust to the balance of power.⁵⁶ Yet, during elections a diaspora could determine its political choices independently of the host government. The anti-Armenian comments prompted Seniora and Jumblatt (both March 14th politicians) to step in to prevent polarization in society. Seniora said: "we were hearing increasingly that so-and-so made it to parliament because of the Sunni vote, or the Shi'a vote, or the Armenian vote. What was this language we were using? Were the Sunnis, Shi'as, and Armenians not Lebanese?"⁵⁷ In his turn, Jumblatt denounced what he called attempts to portray the Armenians and the Tashnags as outsiders. Jumblatt reiterated "having the Tashnags disagreeing with a political alliance did not render it alien." By referring to the contributions of the Armenians to Lebanon, Jumblatt stressed that "Armenians contributed to building the Lebanese state and they were one of the pillars in establishing the national pact...They constituted a part of the Lebanese community."⁵⁸

Identity, Change, and Representation

As mentioned above, the LAD aimed to maintain its distinctive identity and resist acculturation and marginalization. Since the 1920s and the 1930s, Bourj Hammoud's population was mainly Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Maronite.⁵⁹ We emphasized Bourj Hammoud because it remained the center of Armenian life in Lebanon, with its theaters, newspapers, as well as workshops, clothing manufacturers, automobile garages, and artisanal ateliers. However, the demographic makeup of Bourj Hammoud was radically altered during the years of the civil war and even after 2000, when many Armenians migrated to the United States and Europe seeking political stability and a better future. Still, during the civil war in Syria, many Syrians and Kurds, who fled violence in their country, settled in Bourj Hammoud, a neighborhood to which they did not belong.

The three Armenian parties in Lebanon considered migration a threat to Armenian national identity and to the political weight of the community in the host society where "the institutionalized confessional governance system in which the sect is posited as the key register of citizenship and includes a quota system in parliamentary representation based on sect."⁶⁰ Anthropologist Joanne Randa Nucho represented Bourj Hammoud as "a new Armenia in Lebanon,"⁶¹ and Joseph Salloum in a lengthy investigative article represented Bourj Hammoud as 'China Town' of Beirut.⁶² Both authors referred to the importance of Armenian identity, art, traditions, culture, as well as fear of migrants from Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere, who chose to reside in the Armenian neighborhood because it had the advantage of affordable housing and proximity to jobs in nearby industrial zones. We mention particularly Syrian and Kurdish migrant workers, who created fear and posed a threat to the safety of the neighborhood. Simon Turner contended that:

Migrants often created fear and uncertainty in host societies. Those objectless fears is hard to deal with as it creates ontological insecurity or angst; it is translated in public discourse into manageable and concrete threats such as unemployment, crime, national culture and the environment.⁶³

In Beirut, as Nucho argued, belonging to a neighborhood and having intimate familiarity with it was linked to a sense of belonging and

identity “that did not always map neatly onto sectarian identity alone.”⁶⁴ Violent incidents in Bourj Hammoud committed by undocumented Syrian and Kurdish migrant workers created fear among the Armenians. Armenians talked about the threat of Kurdish workers, who carried knives in their pockets and did not hesitate to commit violence when disputes occurred with Armenians. From an Armenian perspective, the incidents were perceived as a harbinger of political instability, a threat to the safety of the neighborhood, and a threat to Armenian identity. In 2011, MTV aired a report entitled “Bourj Hammoud...neighborhood in danger.” The report quoted Armenians complaining that foreign workers had turned the neighborhood into a hub of prostitution and crime. The report completely ignored the failure of state agencies in controlling and organizing the entrance of Syrian and Kurdish migrants to Lebanon and their competition with Armenians and non-Armenians in the labor market. In addition, the report ignored the sectarian mixture, the poverty, the pollution, the infrastructure, and the sociological problems of Bourj Hammoud inhabitants and instead represented Armenians as anti-foreigner. Responding to the MTV report, Mohamed abi-Samra wrote that “Bourj Hammoud was invaded by migrant workers and it had become a victim of ‘mixed people’ and unimplemented laws associated with legal residency.”⁶⁵ Lebanese activist groups criticized the reports and warned that the reports played on racist stereotypes. For example, a representative of the Anti-Racism Movement said “the reports were made from an extremely racist point of view...that intended to show that migrants were criminals, working as sex workers dealing with drugs, killing people.”⁶⁶ Yet, the allegations of crime among migrant workers were not completely unfounded. A fight in 2011 between some Armenians and Kurds in Bourj Hammoud caused large-scale evictions of Kurdish and Syrian migrant workers from their apartments. At first it was unclear whether the evictions were carried out by the municipality or the Tashnag party that exerted a strong security presence in the neighborhood. The area was being transformed from a residential commercial industrial area to one that was filled with foreigners whose residency was illegal. Bourj Hammoud’s Armenian mayor, Antranik Messerlian, who downplayed racism and harassment of people, told the media that the “Lebanese Army was on the ground and it arrested

those who did not have any legal residency and thus had no right to work in the country.”⁶⁷

The municipality took the initiative to deal with the overcrowded apartments and “forced building owners to register their contracts with the municipality.” Messerlian told the media that people in the neighborhood were scared, and that “we did not enforce the migrants to leave the area. We asked them to abide by the laws.”⁶⁸ From the perspective of the Syrian and Kurdish migrants “the measures taken by the municipality targeted them because those measures were not applied to non-Syrian migrants.”⁶⁹ Abbas Saleh politicized the Armenian-Kurdish tensions in light of the Syrian civil war and Syrian migrants who were part of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The municipality and the Tashnag party categorically rejected the politicization of the tensions and negative representations by the media.

The threat of the Kurdish and Syrian workers to the safety of the neighborhood could have been exaggerated, but for Armenians the term ‘Kurd’ would evoke different associations related to the Armenian Genocide of 1915. It is documented that Kurds were instrumental in carrying out the Ottoman era massacres of Armenians as well as assisting in the perpetration of the Genocide.⁷⁰ Although the Armenians were aware of the history of the Genocide, the fear caused by migrant workers did not previously translate to open hostility towards Kurds living in Bourj Hammoud. Nucho assumed that:

By connecting the evictions to the burgeoning uprising in Syria, the news outlet effectively scaled up the events, taking them out of the realm of the local and particular into the scale of the Syrian state and its relation to Lebanese political parties like the Tashnag party. Lebanese and Armenian imaginaries about the power of Syrian surveillance and control would support such a hypothesis.⁷¹

In conclusion, we examined the profile of the LAD and explored Armenian representation in the Lebanese print media. The LAD that had a separate religious tradition that proved long standing, even when its members participated actively in mainstream institutions. Although citizenship was a uniting factor between all Lebanese, the diasporic activism of the Armenians led some journalists and politicians to

politicize the community's political choices and accused it of ignoring Lebanon's national interests. Countervailing voices, however, praised the role of the community and highlighted its contribution to socio-economic development. Sadly, since independence, citizenship in Lebanon was not de-sectarianized or de-ethnicized. Such representation could be attributed to the sectarian and confessional nature of Lebanese society and the existing tension between the groups. We argued that the Lebanese media picked up on a story or event, sensationalizing it further, and attributing the policy choices of the LAD to partisan issues. During elections, the LAD was represented in media portrayals in either positive or negative image depending on the choices of Armenian voters.

This article explored and analyzed how the local media represented and viewed the LAD during certain events when the political choices of the community did not converge with the interests and policies of the various Lebanese groups. We argued that despite being part of the Lebanese plural society, on various occasions, the Armenians were represented as outsiders and were criticized because of their political choices and diasporic activism. Yet, the Lebanese Armenians, as one of the major groups in Lebanon who have enjoyed socio-economic, cultural, religious, and political rights, were eager to safeguard and promote their interests and identity without violating the interests of other groups. The Armenians accepted the duties and responsibilities of citizenship and cultivated a sense of belonging to the host country. We also argued that the fear created by Syrian and Kurdish migrants in an Armenian neighborhood was hard to deal with because it posed ontological insecurity. The media failed to articulate that the issue of security caused by the flow of unorganized migrants spread from traditional security to all walks of life – from culture to environment, infrastructure, and health. If only the media was able to comprehend the ontological insecurity posed by migrants, the Armenians could have not been represented as racist and intolerant.

NOTES

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