

ARMENIANS IN ALEPPO: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

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In the lore of the Armenians, Aleppo symbolizes survival. They arrived here after spending months walking under the scorching desert sun of Deir Zor. During those long marches from Turkey to Syria, they witnessed the death of their children from thirst, hunger, and disease, the cruel raping of their mothers, wives, and daughters, and the brutal torture of the remaining men, mostly the elderly, for the majority of the young males had already been massacred in Turkey. Having witnessed those atrocities and survived them was overwhelming for many survivors.

Even before the 1915 massacres, Armenians had lived in Aleppo for centuries. The 40 Martyrs Church, a 15th century Apostolic Church, is known to be one of the oldest churches in the diaspora. However, it was the settlement of thousands of survivors of the Armenian Genocide in the early 20th century that laid the foundation of Aleppo's contemporary community.

Native Arabs in Syria rescued, sheltered, and supported the displaced, homeless, orphaned, persecuted, sick, starved, and traumatized Armenians. They were granted citizenship with all rights and privileges. It is safe to say that the Arabs played a significant role in the survival of the Armenian diaspora, as thousands of refugees spread to all parts of the Middle East, Europe, northern America and Australia, after first settling in Aleppo.

Within a generation, according to Keith David Watenpaugh, Associate Professor of Modern Islam, Human Rights and Peace at the University of California, Davis, the Armenians "went from being penniless refugees, a population made up mostly of women and children survivors, to very much a middle class... involved in all forms of trade, education, medicine, dentistry, and also more traditional professions like carpets and jewelry making. So they transformed Aleppo, and they've been transformed by Aleppo."

In 2009, Diasporan Armenians funded the construction of a monument dedicated to the Armenian-Arab friendship in Yerevan, Armenia, called "Monument of Gratitude" to symbolize the gratefulness of the Armenian nation towards the Arabs for their humane stance in 1915. Encapsulating the thoughts of many of his compatriots, Walid Ikhlas, a Syrian writer, said on the occasion: "No relations between the representatives of any two nations have reached the level of those between the Arabs and Armenians of Syria. When the horror of the massacres elevated a wave of hatred to destroy the Armenian souls, these relations deepened and consolidated to reach the highest levels of friendship. This monument is

not a mere sign of devotion to the Arab nation, it is a manifestation of the nobility of the Armenian soul, which today is willing to express the gratitude for old deeds in a beautiful act.”

In November 2012, Armenia sent the 3rd batch of humanitarian aid of “Help your Brother” to Syria. The distribution of 13 tons of parcels, including medicine, presented by the Armenian people to the Syrians was carried out by the Red Crescent of Aleppo, the Armenian Prelacy, Aleppo Emergency Unit and the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia, the only country that still has its consulate in Aleppo functioning. Expressing his appreciation of the aid, the Governor of Aleppo said, “The Armenian aid indicates the deep friendship and fraternity between the Syrian and Armenian peoples. The Syrian people will never forget the support of friendly peoples.”

It is believed that at its peak Armenians in Aleppo counted around 220,000 people. They enjoyed broad cultural autonomy. The Armenians created a distinct socio-economic and industrial standing and succeeded in integrating with the social fabric of Damascus, Homs, Latakia, Kesab, Alraqla, Alhasaka and Qamishli, where they still live in smaller numbers among a population which includes Alawites, Sunnis, Shiites, Arab Christians, Kurds, and Palestinians.

Presently, around three quarters of all of Syria’s 80,000 Armenian community lives in Aleppo where 4 secondary and 5 elementary Armenian-language schools operate. While most of the educational, cultural, sports, youth and charitable associations such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union (1910), Armenian Syrian Red Cross Association (1919), Armenian Old Age Home (1923), Gertasirats Cultural Association (1924), Kermanig-Vasbouragan Cultural Association (1928), Hamazkayin Cultural and Educational Association (1930), Armenian Youth Association (1932), Cathedral of Our Mother of Reliefs (1840), Bethel Church (1922), Emmanuel Church (1923), Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church (1933), Church of Our Lady of Annunciation (1942) are based in Aleppo, they also exist or operate branches on a smaller scale in all the cities mentioned above.

Today, descendants of the once persecuted-protected-prosperous Armenians in Aleppo feel that truly history repeats itself and that the shocking, outrageous, and disturbing stories they heard from their grandparents, aunts and uncles are being re-enacted daily in a country that symbolized security, solidarity and survival for their people.

Since the fighting broke out in Syria in March 2011, tens of thousands of Armenians have evacuated the city and left for Lebanon and Armenia, hundreds have been injured, dozens killed, many kidnapped and held hostage in return for incredibly enormous ransoms. Many Armenian

churches, schools, the genocide memorial, and institutions have been burned, looted, confiscated or simply destroyed.

On September 14, 2012, the leaders of the three churches in Aleppo, Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical, met and issued a joint statement: "As the bloodshed continues unabated in our dear country... what adds to our anguish are the unsuccessful attempts of presenting the Syrian Armenians taking part in the armed battles of the current Syrian crisis or trying to actually drag them into such a conflict. We reiterate today that the peaceful co-existence that the Syrian Armenians have cultivated throughout the decades continues... and will definitely stay against all kinds of violence and armed collisions."

The official position of "positive neutrality" adopted by the Armenian community in Aleppo is reminiscent of the position the Armenians in Beirut claimed during the long years of the civil war in Lebanon. The latter conflict and the continued escalation of violence in Lebanon resulted in the permanent displacement and mass migration of the Armenians who, like the Armenians in Aleppo, sought peace, stability, security, and a new home that was going to be yet further away from their confiscated ancestral lands in Turkey. The popular belief among Armenians who have temporarily taken refuge in Lebanon and Armenia is that once again they are being chased away from a place they had begun to call 'home away from home'.

Invariably, Armenians view their fate as being part of a bigger plan that is going to affect the region for generations to come. They believe that the increasing exodus of other minorities, mainly Christian, from Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, the intensifying violence and the growing Islamist influence have the potential to shape regional politics, just as the Armenian Genocide did before it.