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COMMUNITARIANISM AND CRISIS RESPONSE

THE MODEL OF LEBANESE-ARMENIANS

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper aims to give a detailed overview of the political, social, and economic footprints of Armenians in Lebanon, as well as the role their institutions played in rediscovering and reshaping a communitarian sub-identity in Lebanon. Communitarianism – in the sense of commitment or duty towards a community unified by its history, language, and destiny – has pushed Armenians in Lebanon to act as a united front in the face of multiple crises.

This paper will highlight the way communitarianism shaped the crisis response in the Armenian community, and assess whether this model was successful in helping the community effectively face the challenges it faced. It covers the stages from the early refugee crisis (1920s), passing through the civil war period (1975-1990), moving to the Syrian-Armenian refugee crisis, the Covid pandemic and the Lebanese financial breakdown, and finally the August 4 blast.

This paper is divided into four parts and is centered around a qualitative and quantitative look at the Armenian community's unified efforts in the face of difficult challenges.

1- Communitarianism and Re-discovering Armenian Nationalism

First, we will present a theoretical perspective and reflect briefly on the community's political participation, and the role of the Lebanese-Armenian political elite in "reconstructing" the identity of a nation that has lost its homeland.

2- Communitarianism in terms of Crisis Response

Then, we highlight the "positive neutrality" position of the community throughout the civil war period.

3- Fighting on multiple fronts and the Community's Response

Third, we discuss the role of communitarianism and networking (both on the communal and diasporic level) in facing the post-civil war crises.

LIMITATIONS

The paper's limitation lies in not being able to cover or trace all the existing grassroots initiatives due to word constraint; therefore, we concentrated on community initiatives, and relief organized by prominent organizations, institutions, and players in the community. Moreover, there is limited literature about the Armenian community's relief and crisis management responses, as most are written uniquely in Armenian, and are mostly buried in party or church archives.

Communitarianism and Re-discovering Armenian Nationalism

NATIONALISM & COMMUNITARIANISM

In his book “Myths and Memories of the Nation” Anthony Smith argues that nationalism is neither a primordial force that occasionally erupts out of the ground nor an invented tradition designed by elites to endure modernization. Rather, it is a product of power from the rediscovery and reinterpretation of cultural myths and symbols by ruling elites.¹ Smith’s argument is backed up by evidence from the diasporic nationalism of Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. His theory is counter-argued by Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities”. Anderson depicts a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people (not the elite) who perceive themselves as part of a group.² As for the Lebanese-Armenians, their nationalism was a product of “communitarianism” shaped by the ruling elite and past traumas that had been socially constructed, and which produced a strong sub-identity.

Stanford Encyclopedia defines “communitarianism” as the idea that human identities are shaped by different social relations and that the conception of human nature shapes our moral and political judgments.³ Meaning, it is the belief that a person’s social identity is molded by community relationships, with less importance placed on individuality. Thus this sense of belonging pushes individuals to feel a certain amount of responsibility towards their community.

COMMUNITARIANISM FACILITATES THE CRISIS RESPONSE

The Lebanese confessional system and socio-communal structure are organized in a way that reinforces conflict in a system that promotes sectarian/communal identity. Although Armenians settled in Lebanon during different historical periods, the influx of Ottoman Armenian refugees started after the Armenian Genocide. During the early 1920s and late 1930s (with the annexation of Syrian Iskandaron by Turkey), Armenian refugees faced humanitarian difficulties.⁴ The Armenian Churches (Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical), together with compatriot Unions, organized the resettlement of the refugees with the help of the French, who’s mandate included Lebanon. To manage the refugee crisis in December 1919, the “Union Nationale Armenienne” (Armenian National Union) was founded to organize fundraisings. The ANU created subcommittees to address the educational, health, and socio-economic needs of the community.⁵ Moreover, the compatriotic unions (which exist) had bought lands around Beirut to resettle the refugees and build schools.

It is important to mention that until the signing of the treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Armenians in Lebanon overwhelmingly supported the idea of returning to their homeland. As Armenia lost its independence in 1920 and became part of the Soviet Union, two conflicting ideas emerged in the community.

¹ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, USA, 24/2/2000.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 13/9/2016, p. 8

³ Communitarianism, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 4/10/2001, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/communitarianism/>

⁴ Hilmar Kaiser, “The Armenians in Lebanon during the Armenian Genocide”, *Armenians of Lebanon: From Past Princesses and Refugees to Present-Day Community*, ed. by Aida Boudjikianian, Haigazian University & The Armenian Heritage Press, 2009, pp 31-56

⁵ Antranig Dakessian, *Two Documents from the Life of the Lebanese Armenians (Armenian)*, *Haigazian Armenological Review*, Vol. 38, Beirut, 2018, pp. 705-730

COMMUNITARIANISM FACILITATES THE CRISIS RESPONSE

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF -Tashnag Party), opposed Soviet Armenia, and lost hope in returning to the homeland, encouraging Armenians to apply for Lebanese citizenship. But at the same time, the party implanted the vision of an imaginary Armenia, a homeland occupied by the Turks and Soviets. This homeland, which was identified as “Free, Independent, and United Armenia”, was used as a tool to mobilize the community, reshape its identity, produce a new kind of nationalism, and prevent assimilation. On the other hand, the pro-Soviet Armenian parties of that time, the Social Democratic Hunchagian Party (SDHP) and the Armenian Liberal-Democratic Party (ALDP) or Ramgavar, supported Soviet Armenia. They were much more integrated into Lebanese society and established strong ties with Arab leftist movements.

According to Anderson “the fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion...Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but in the style in which they are imagined.”⁶

This is true for the case of Lebanese-Armenians. Both in 2014 and 2016, when conflict erupted in the Armenian town of Kessab in Syria and the region of Nagorno-Karabakh bordering Armenia and Azerbaijan, Lebanese-Armenians were the first to mobilize and organize fundraisings. Many started to raise slogans such as “Never again” in connection to the 1915-1916 collective trauma and Genocide. The memory of the Genocide and “victimhood” play an important role in shaping the identity of this community. The fear of insecurity, wars, and ambiguity are always associated with the memory of the Genocide.

RECONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY OF A NATION THAT LOST ITS HOMELAND

In the mid-1950s, during the peak of the cold war, Lebanese-Armenians experienced an inter-communal cold war. The ARF, realizing that the balance of power was in its favor (many communists and Hunchags repatriated to Soviet Armenia), took control of the Armenian Apostolic Catholicosate in Lebanon and prevented it from falling under Soviet control. As a result, the Armenian Apostolic church was divided along political lines. In 1958, as Lebanon witnessed domestic instability, Armenian political parties participated in the civil strife and as a result, more than 200 Armenians were killed and assassinated.⁷

The Lebanese Civil War pushed the Armenian community to rediscover its identity in a sectorially fertile land, and to build a “nation within a state”. The community built its own courts, cultural and educational centers, medical institutions, and bank, in order to provide the security its members needed. It is not surprising that Lebanon is called the heart of the Armenian Diaspora (despite the shrinking number of Armenians). It indicates that both Smith’s and Anderson’s theories can be applied to the Lebanese-Armenian context. The community’s identity is both a rediscovery and a continuation of the cultural and political heritage of an imaginary Armenian homeland, shaped by a combination of political and socio-economic factors, and molded by the community leaders in the country. However, the start of the civil war in 1975 disrupted the community’s progress, and once again, Armenians faced an existential threat. It was at that moment that the community leaders came together once again and tried to respond to the political and economic crisis.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 13/9/2016, p. 6

⁷ Yeghia Tashjian, *The Origin, success, and failure of the Lebanese-Armenian “Third Force” during the intra-communal cold war (1956-1960)*, *Armenians of Lebanon (II) Proceedings of the Conference (14-16 May 2014)*, Haigazian University Press, Beirut 2017, p. 182

Communitarianism in terms of Crisis Response

HOW DID THE COMMUNITY FACE THE CIVIL WAR ?

The Lebanese-Armenian community was put in a very difficult position during the civil war, as they were stuck in the midst of it all. Unlike in 1958, where the Armenian political parties took part in the civil strife, in 1975, they chose not to engage in violence and adopt neutrality. **This was mainly due to three factors:**

- 1.**Armenian political parties learned not to repeat the inter-communal fighting which occurred from 1956 till 1960;
- 2.** The older generation, and the political leaders who were exiled from Soviet Armenia were replaced by the younger generation, and the hostility at the time between the Tashnag Party and the Soviet Union was starting to disappear;
- 3.**The commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 1965 with a united front reconsolidated the commitment to communitarianism among the Lebanese-Armenians.

These factors pushed the community's political elites to put the community's interests above their ideological and political convictions.

POSITIVE NEUTRALITY

Thus, the Lebanese-Armenian community declared “positive neutrality” during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). This policy was welcomed by the Lebanese Muslim community, who saw the Armenians as a bridge between them and the other Christian sects. While some Christian elites, sensing an existential threat, felt “betrayed” by the Armenians, who “should have returned favor and fought with them against the ‘Lebanese Muslims’ and Palestinian militias”.⁸

According to Vera Yacoubian, the policy of positive neutrality meant “not to be with any party which endorsed its political objectives by force; on the contrary, to be with all the political parties that promoted dialogue and gathered around a united Lebanon”.⁹ That is to say that the community did not adopt “passive neutrality” and disengaged itself from the conflict, but actively engaged in dialogue and mediation efforts without taking sides with conflicting parties.

⁸ Interview with Vera Yacoubian, 25/9/2020

⁹ Vera Yacoubian, “Armenian Power-Sharing and Peacebuilding in Lebanon, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, RUHR University of Bochum, Germany.

POSITIVE NEUTRALITY

For the community leaders, preserving this neutrality was no easy feat. The parties, through their decades-old networking channels with different local and regional actors, had to de-escalate some clashes in Armenian neighborhoods. They proved useful in mediations to bring back kidnapped Armenians. The Armenian parties also founded “self-defense units” in order to guarantee the safety of the community in Armenian-majority neighborhoods such as Bourj Hamoud and Achrafieh. Finally, Armenian parties and religious and social organizations started to collect donations and organized fundraising events abroad to help the disadvantaged Armenian families in Lebanon.

For this reason, the “COMARES” was founded. “COMARES” came as a result of the leaders of the three Armenian Churches (Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical), and representatives from the three parties, the AGBU, and the Armenian Red Cross Relief of Lebanon, coming together in an effort headed by His Holiness Khoren I Catholicos of Holy See of Cilicia.¹⁰ It repaired Armenian businesses, churches, and provided humanitarian aid and relief to thousands of Armenian families in collaboration with national and international agencies, and parallelly to the Soviet Armenians and their government, as well as wealthy Armenians, who organized fundraisers for the community.¹¹

The war was costly for the community, as many immigrated to the West and Western Beirut was almost emptied from its Armenian population. This drove the Lebanese-Armenian community to initiate a reform plan – based on the decentralization of the government, the upholdment of workers’ rights, and the encouragement of women’s participation in all public spheres – with the hope of bringing an end to the civil war. The Block believed that granting more power to the administrative and municipal authorities would make government projects more successful and effective.

Thus the coordination and unity between different Armenian political parties, denominations, and organizations was an effective model that was later adopted during various challenging stages.



Lebanese-Armenian commemorating the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in Martyres' Square, Beirut. (www.the961.com)

¹⁰ Vicken Avakian “For the Armenians and Lebanon; 25th anniversary of Defending the Armenian Populated Neighborhoods”, Beirut, Lebanon, 2000, pp. 392-396

¹¹ Ibid.

Fighting on Multiple Fronts and Challenges

HOW DID THE COMMUNITY RESPOND TO THESE CHALLENGES

During the Taif agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war, Armenians consolidated their presence in the Lebanese institutions, but despite this, the community started facing domestic challenges mainly due to social-economic problems. The experiences of the civil war led to lessons and best practices later adopted in the post-civil war era. With the start of the Syrian-Armenian refugee crisis, Armenians in Lebanon once again mobilized to provide humanitarian assistance. The vast networking system, which was already established decades ago, allowed the community to more efficiently and effectively handle the challenges that accompanied the refugee crisis. Once again the pillars of the Armenian national institutions, i.e., the Church(es) and parties, came together to address the socio-economic needs of the community.

This section of the paper will highlight the humanitarian role of major Armenian institutions and the level of coordination among them in addressing the growing needs of the community and combating the challenges of the Syrian-Armenian refugees, pandemic, financial crisis, and the Beirut Port blast.

SYRIAN-ARMENIAN REFUGEES

In 2012 as Aleppo was captured by the Syrian rebels, there was an influx of Syrian-Armenian families to Lebanon, and the Armenian community in Lebanon mobilized once again to provide humanitarian aid to the families. The Tashnag Party already established a small cell to mobilize and send humanitarian relief to Aleppo Armenians, meanwhile, in order to address the needs of Syrian-Armenians in Lebanon, it founded the “Syrian-Armenian Relief Commission” which was composed of the three Armenian denominations, Karaguezian and Jinishian centers, AFHIL (Armenian Fund for Health Insurance in Lebanon), Armenian Relief Cross in Lebanon (ARCL) and the Armenian Parliamentary Block office. The main aim of this commission was to provide housing, medication, financial and education aid for the refugees, The commission also facilitated the registration of the refugees at UNHCR.



Hospitalization Covered
Syrian Armenian Relief Commission covered 15% of Armenian refugee bills. The UNHCR covered the other 85%.



By 2012, 1800 families were resettled in various Armenian neighborhoods.



By 2014, the tuitions of 550+ Syrian-Armenian students enrolled in Armenian schools were fully covered.



\$4.7 million raised
In the form of scholarship support, cash distribution, food distribution (until August 2020).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC A HEALTH CRISIS

To fight the COVID-19 pandemic and mobilize the community, the Central Committee of the Tashnag Party had a meeting with Armenian social and health institutions and established the “Corona Crisis Committee Lebanon”, formed in late February 2020. The committee raised awareness on the public safety measures regarding the pandemic on social media and helped infected Armenians with financial, food, and healthcare assistance.¹²



Conducting COVID-19 PCR tests in Bourj Hammoud with the help of municipality and local medical institutions.



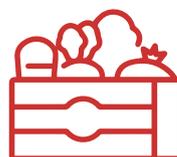
48,000
Masks distributed



4,500
Anti-bacterial packages distributed



2,100
Food bonds distributed.



2,500
Food boxes distributed.



Medical Aid
For 781 families.



5,000+
PCR Tests were conducted in Armenian streets free of charge.



Free Housing
For Armenian nurses & doctors working with Covid-19 cases.

¹² Corona Crisis Committee Lebanon, Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/CoronaCrisisCommitteeLebanon>

THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

The financial crisis hit the industrial and economic centers of the Armenian-populated areas hard; many Armenian families were forced to immigrate, the community's middle class was on the edge of extinction. To address the needs of the community, the Armenian political parties, organizations, and churches mobilized their resources to help the disadvantaged families. This humanitarian mobilization was later intensified with the blast in Beirut Port which devastated the Armenian neighborhoods and industrial sectors in eastern Beirut and the surrounding areas. institutions in relief efforts, and community mobilization.

Before the crisis, the Armenian Parliamentary block led by the Tashnag Party had already implemented several social and educational projects for Armenians such as granting scholarships for Armenian university students, covering marriage expenses in church, and giving financial aid to families with more than 3 children. The party's committee raised money for Armenian families in need, and provided them with ration packs and medical assistance. Meanwhile, the Social Service Committee of the Hunchagian Party and the executive council of the AEBU (Armenian Educational Benevolent Union). At the start of 2020, started distributing food rations after the blast, and the latter transformed its Socio-Medical Dispensary clinic into an urgent care facility for the wounded.¹³

Armenian benevolent and socio-medical institutions and organizations also played important role in addressing the needs of the community. As Armenians began to experience restrictions in cash access and growing unemployment and business loss, organizations like the "Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) played a vital role in addressing the community's food security, providing food rations and fresh meals to thousands of families.¹⁴

It is important to note that despite each being a separate institution, there was strong networking and cooperation between them. Together they have provided hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of assistance to the Armenian community, from healthcare and psychosocial support, to capacity building and renovation of damaged homes and businesses.



Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) sending humanitarian aid to Lebanon after the Beirut Blast.



Lebanese-Armenians registering their damaged properties at their local LARC committee, Photo Markar, LARC Facebook page.

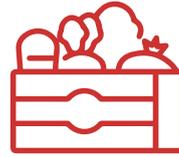
¹³ AEBU Beirut Provides Urgently Needed Assistance, Massis Post, 11/8/2020, <https://massispost.com/2020/08/aebu-beirut-provides-urgently-needed-assistance/>

¹⁴ Virtual interview with Arine Ghazarian, Executive Director of AGBU Lebanon, 12/10/2020

THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

The churches and religious institutions also worked autonomously, and through their vast networking system, had paid special attention to the community's educational, social, and economic needs. The Armenian Apostolic Prelacy Lebanon has been one of the leading forces in humanitarian efforts. The Prelacy organized multiple fundraisers, provided financial aid support for university and school students, and donated clothing and food.¹⁵

As for the Diocese, they provided monetary aid and ceased tuition payments for all students in its schools during the academic year 2020-2021. And as the financial crisis intensified, the Armenian and Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) governments started financially supporting Armenian schools in Lebanon. With support from the vatican and Armenian diaspora, the Patriarchy and the Armenian Avengelical communities also helped by reducing school tuition fees by two thirds for the coming 3 years and providing food aid respectively.



1,500 Food Boxes
& 90 portions of hot meals distributed daily to Armenian families.



13,500 Fresh Meals
Distributed to families.



350 Patients Daily
Provided with healthcare support by Karagheusian Center.²



Tuition Fees

- Tuition Fees for academic year 2020-2021 waived by AGBU.¹
- 5020 tuitions covered.
- Tuitions for academic year 2020-2021 waved by Diocese schools
- Only small symbolic tuition payment for coming years in Armenian Catholic and Evangelical schools.⁴



5000 Families

Currently being given cash support.³

¹ Virtual interview with Arine Ghazarian, Executive Director of AGBU Lebanon, 12/10/2020

² Karagheusian Association (HKCC) Primary Health Care Center in Lebanon, Eight Year Data Report 2013-2020.

³ Armenian Prelacy of Beirut, www.armprelacylb.org

⁴ Virtual interview with Serje Tchoukhdarian, lawyer of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate, 15/10/2020

¹⁵ Armenian Prelacy of Beirut, www.armprelacylb.org

THE BEIRUT BLAST

The catastrophic Beirut blast devastated many Armenian educational and religious institutions, which endured heavy material damages. Costs of the repairs were covered by internal and external donors, such as the Armenian Church, and the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA). Immediately after the Beirut Blast, the “AGBU Lebanon Disaster Response Unit” was established, and with a group of volunteers and scouts, visited homes to assess and report on damages.¹⁶ The volunteer groups were divided into various sub-committees and started providing emergency assistance focusing on three areas: food distribution, medical and psychosocial assistance. The Howard Karagheusian Commemorative Corporation (HKCC), Jinishian Memorial Program in Lebanon (JMPL), and the Armenian Relief Cross in Lebanon (ARCL) also played pivotal roles in helping the community overcome this difficult period.^{17 18}



Funds / Donations

- The Armenian Evangelical community raised a total of around **\$1,150,000,000** to renovate its institutions damaged by the blast.
- Jinishian Memorial Program in Lebanon raised **\$212,884 + \$124,436** through donations.
- Governments of Armenia and Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) donated **\$100,000** and **\$50,000** respectively.
- Donator Aleco Bezigian and his wife donated **\$1 million** and a project was adopted by the Catholicosate to help more than 2000 needy Armenian families.



265 Homes Fixed

265 homes renovated by AGBU, with 100 still in progress

To make the humanitarian work more effective after the blast, the “Lebanese-Armenian Rehabilitation Commission” was established on August 12 to recover what the Lebanese-Armenians had lost in the blast and facilitate the rehabilitation of the community.¹⁹ The commission consisted of representatives from the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical communities, Armenian political parties, and humanitarian organizations. It is running a massive initiative to rebuild more than 4000 homes and businesses. On the other hand, wealthy Armenian businessmen from abroad have compensated those who lost their relatives in the blast, and fundraisers were being organized in the US, Europe, and Australia to support these efforts.



Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) sending humanitarian aid to Lebanon after the Beirut Blast.



The AGBU Armenian Youth Association carrying out humanitarian work under the direction of AGBU Lebanon Regional Chairman Gerard Tufenkjian (Youth.am , 15/9/2020)

¹⁶ Virtual interview with Arine Ghazarian, Executive Director of AGBU Lebanon, 12/10/2020

¹⁷ Armenian Relief Cross in Lebanon, www.lokh-arcl.org

¹⁸ Jinishian Memorial Program-Lebanon, Executive Summary Report 2019, <https://www.jinishian-lb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Executive-Summary-and-Charts-2019.pdf>

¹⁹ Lebanese-Armenian Rehabilitation Commission, <https://www.facebook.com/LebArmRelCom>

CONCLUSION

The Lebanese-Armenian community was very well organized and effective in responding to crises in the country. The lessons learned by COMARES during the civil war were instrumental in making the Armenian community's response during the following crises more effective and widespread. Without this sense of belonging and unity through shared experiences, the Armenian community would not have banded together as it has since the Armenian genocide. However, just as important, are the lack of security and absence of government services and support, which have pushed the Lebanese-Armenian in particular to "take care of their own" and come together on all levels to overcome their community's shared challenges. By doing so they have built vast national and international networks which have survived the test of time and proven beneficial through every crisis faced by the Armenian community.

Time and time again, the international Armenian community has pushed all political and ideological differences aside to face existential threats as a unified front; this is true for the Lebanese case as well. The Armenian community around the world have strong lobbying power and is an important pillar in Middle Eastern politics. The Lebanese Armenian community also holds sway in political matters in the country and plays a big role on the political and economic levels. The community still "exports" teachers, professors, researchers both to Armenia and other Diasporan communities.

Over the decades, Armenians forged a strong institutionalized national character in Lebanon. This identity was partially the product

of the Armenian school system and the political atmosphere in Lebanon, which was different from other countries. From a political perspective, the community leaders wanted to sustain the civil war legacy, which is: "Armenians being a political bridge between conflicting parties". The Armenians' insistence on an Armenian identity before anything else gave them a separate identity even within the Lebanese Christian community.

On the economic level, different groups realized that they cannot become self-sustainable without proper cooperation, and such common or unified efforts were always blessed or initiated by the Armenian Catholicosate or the main political and religious actors in the community. Strong or large groups within the community did not tend to marginalize or destroy small groups or parties, instead, they cooperated with them irrespective of the balance of power and sectarian distribution. This was unique for the Armenians within the Lebanese system, as the "Armenian model" here is deeply rooted in historical experiences, and has gradually been reshaped throughout the decades.

This model can be further studied in terms of grassroots initiatives and elite mobilization of relatively small diasporan ethnoreligious communities in different parts of the world.

