



DE GRUYTER
OPEN

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN REVIEW

Volume 8, 2014

**THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND ARMENIAN REFUGEES.
THE FORMATION OF THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA IN SYRIA.**

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Abstract

The League of Nations played an important role in securing the Armenian community after the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. Nonetheless, the Armenian Question, which had a definite political accent during the First and Second Assembly of the League of Nations, remained unresolved. Afterwards, the League reformulated its policy towards the Armenian case, which involved an explicit shift from a political to a humanitarian point of view.

The humanitarian actions had a number of different aspects: the liberation of the Armenian Genocide survivors from Turkish and Islamic institutions, the provision of Nansen passports to Armenian refugees, the settlement of Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia and the establishment of Armenian communities in Syria and Lebanon.

This article touches upon these initiatives, concentrating on the settlement of the Armenians in Syria. The League of Nations elaborated a massive program for the settlement of Armenian refugees there, which laid a foundation for the establishment of the huge Armenian diaspora in that country.

ISSN 1752–7503

DOI: 10.2478/caeer-2014-0004

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First publication

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Introduction

After 200 years of devastating wars between the Ottoman Empire and Iran, most of the historical Armenian lands came under Turkish rule. From that time on, Armenians formed a significant religious and linguistic minority in the Ottoman Empire, where they maintained a socially and legally subordinate but peaceful coexistence until the rise of Turkish nationalism in 19th century. Armenian massacres began in the late 19th century under the rule of Abdul-Hamid II, resulting in the death of nearly 100–300,000 Armenians. These sporadic massacres culminated in 1915, when under cover of the First World War, Turkish nationalists implemented a plan to exterminate the Armenians which involved Turkish authorities first disarming and killing the male Armenian population. On 24 April 1915, the Armenian élite and community leaders were arrested and murdered. Those who were not killed, mainly women and children, were forced immediately to undergo death marches through the Deir el Zor desert in Syria. Overall, between 1 and 1.5 million people died as a result of these events.¹

One of the consequences of the Armenian Genocide was a huge number of refugees. Those refugees, mainly children, women and the elderly, who survived genocide and deportation, faced a new catastrophe—refugeehood. They were scattered throughout the world: some were settled in the Caucasus and Russia, while others moved, amongst other places, to the Near East, Egypt, Greece, France and the USA. Routinely Armenian refugees were confronted with famine and disease. When local populations provided assistance, it tended to be small scale and disorganized. There was no state assistance available to them since the Transcaucasia Armenian Republic (1918–20) had ceased to exist.² In Turkey itself, having been complicit in

¹ For more details on the Armenian Genocide see Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, I.B. Tauris, London-New-York, 2011.

² On December 2, 1920, Soviet power was established in Armenia and the Republic of Armenia ceased to exist.

attempted genocide, the state was interested only in confiscating and privatising Armenian property.³ During the massacres and deportations of 1915, huge numbers of refugees moved to Syria. Some deportees died on the shores of the Euphrates, but those who survived gathered in the refugee camps near the big cities of Syria, which became important sites of refuge and safety.

The Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920) put the end to the Ottoman Era by dividing much the former Empire among the Allies: parts of Southern Anatolia, Cilicia, Syri, and Lebanon were put in the hands of the French, while the British took control of Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Iraq. Thrace was put under the control of Greece, which also contested Western Anatolia. The capital of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople, was put under the control of the chief Allied powers. The Republic of Armenia, formed in the Caucasus as a result of the collapse of the Russian Empire, encompassed also Armenian territories from Eastern Anatolia. This new situation gave Armenian refugees an opportunity to return to Cilicia and Anatolia.

However, immediately after these events, nationalist Turks, headed by Mustafa Kemal started armed resistance aiming to restore control over Anatolia. With this goal, on 24 September 1920, Turkish nationalist forces began the invasion of the Republic of Armenia, which ended on 2 December with the Treaty of Alexandropol. As a result, Armenia lost its territories in Eastern Anatolia.⁴

After the conclusion of the Angora Agreement with France at the end of 1921, French troops started to evacuate Cilicia to which nearly 200.000 Armenians had moved in the wake of genocide with the intention of establishing a national home.⁵ The departure of the French led to new waves of nearly 50,000 refugees moving to Syria.⁶ Refugee movements were further exacerbated by the defeat of Greece in the Greco-Turkish War in 1921. Thereafter Turkish troops re-occupied their lost territories with subsequent atrocities involving the killing of between 12,000 and 30,000 Christians, mostly Greeks and Armenians, in Smyrna (today Izmir).⁷

³ M. Arzumanyan, *Armenia in 1914–1917*, Yerevan 1969, p. 464 (in Armenian).

⁴ For more details see E. Zohrabyan, *The Turkish-Armenian War of 1920 and the Great Powers*, Yerevan 1999 (in Armenian).

⁵ Y. Barsegov, *The Genocide of Armenians: the Responsibility of Turkey and the Obligations of the World Community. Documents and Commentary*, Volume I, Moscow 2002, p. 674. (In Russian)

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 675.

⁷ M. Housden, *The League of Nations and the Organization of Peace*, Pearson Longman 2012, p. 67.

The nationalistic campaign in Turkey resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1922. Thereafter the Treaty of Sèvres was nullified and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). This, too, led to mass casualties and waves of refugees. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians and Greeks began to flee Turkish territory, resulting in massive crowds of refugees in and around Constantinople—130,000 from Smyrna and 70,000 from the Brouse Region.⁸ The attempt to ‘un-mix’ Muslim and Christian communities resulted in a compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923 administered by the League of Nations.⁹ Together with 1.4 million Greeks, nearly 300,000 Armenians left Turkey.¹⁰ While Greek refugees could find a new home in their nation state, an Armenian state had ceased to exist, having been absorbed by the Soviets at the end of 1920. ‘Greek refugees were coming from the country where they had been a minority, but were established in a country where they were citizens, which was not true in the case of Armenian refugees, whose status and settlement were tough issues’.¹¹ Consequently the issue of the Armenian refugee settlement was left open. So, the crowds of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon resulted from the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and its aftermath; but the end of the First World War also opened a new page in the history of international relations. It saw the creation of the League of Nations, which aimed to promote international co-operation, to achieve international peace and security, also to establish the core principles of international law as a basis for state relationships. Despite some challenges, the League took a prominent role for itself in the ‘post-war’ Eastern Mediterranean.¹² Yet the League’s First Assembly failed to solve the Armenian issue. The organization proved unable to create an Armenian mandate, to identify a mandatory state,¹³ or to put an end to the hostilities between Armenia and Kemalist Turkey.¹⁴ It also failed to admit the Republic of Armenia to the League.¹⁵

⁸ Psomiades, *Fridtjof Nansen and the Greek Refugee Crisis 1922–1924*, New York 2011, p. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–83.

¹⁰ The League of Nations Archives and Historical Collection Section (hereinafter LNA), Geneva, League of Nations, *The record of the Assembly Plenary meetings*, Geneva 1930.

¹¹ D. Kevonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire, Les acteurs européens et la société proche-orientale pendant l'entre deux-guerres*, Sorbonne 2004, p. 311.

¹² S. Pedersen, ‘Review Essay: Back to the League of Nations,’ *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): pp. 1091–1117.

¹³ E. Gzoyan, ‘The League of Nations and the Question of a Mandate for Armenia,’ *Central and Eastern European Review* (2009) 3: pp. 35–52.

¹⁴ E. Gzoyan, ‘Turkish-Armenian War of 1920 and the League of Nations,’ *Central and Eastern European Review* 5 (2011), www.spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/display/ssishistoryjournal/2011,+Volume+5.

¹⁵ E. Gzoyan, ‘The Admission of the Republic of Armenia to the League of Nations,’ *Central and Eastern European Review* 4 (2010), www.spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/download/attachments/.../Gzoyan0110.pdf.

The League of Nations and the 1915 Armenian Genocide: Policy Formulation

The League considered the Armenian massacres and deportations on several occasions. For instance, the events of 1915—as committed by Talat and his friends—were described as a most heinous crime by Lord Robert Cecil (delegate for South Africa) during the First Assembly, while during the Second Assembly Greek delegate Seferiades identified the organised and planned massacres of hundreds of thousands of Armenians as a deliberate kind of extermination better known to barbarians than to the civilized world.

Given the inability of the First Assembly to solve the Armenian issue, starting from the end of 1921 the League formulated a new policy towards Armenians which involved an explicit shift from a political to a humanitarian solution. This new policy had several facets: the Rescue Movement to reclaim Islamicised Armenian women and children; the provision of Nansen passports to the Armenian refugees; efforts to settle Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia; and the settlement scheme to establish Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon. According to K. Watenpugh these initiatives indicated that the League believed ‘remedying the injuries of the Armenians as a consequence of the war and Genocide’ to be parts of its ‘mandate’, and that its ‘future projects on the settlement of the Armenian refugees were based on the concept of communal survival rather than of assimilation’.¹⁶

As just mentioned, the first dimension of the League’s humanitarian approach towards the post-genocidal Armenian community involved rescue operations to liberate Armenian women and children from Turkish household, harems, brothels and other Muslim institutions.¹⁷ During the Armenian Genocide, women and children were deported from their homeland and sent to Arab deserts where many were killed, raped, humiliated or died from starvation and disease. The children and young women were taken forcibly by Turks and Kurds and later sold to brothels and orphanages, or kept in the Islam households where they were compelled to perform the most degrading tasks, or they were shut up in harems. Children separated from their Christian faith were forced to disown and forget their past, their birth certificates were

¹⁶ K. D. Watenpugh, *Between Communal Survival and National Aspiration: Armenian Genocide Refugees, The League of Nations and the Practices of Interwar Humanitarianism*, <http://humanrightsinitiative.ucdavis.edu/files/2012/10/Watenpugh-Between-Communal-Survival-and-National-Aspiration.pdf>

¹⁷ For more on this see K. D. Watenpugh, ‘The League of Nations’ Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927’, *American Historical Review* December 2010, pp. 1315–39.

forged and their names were replaced by Turkish ones. The same happened to the women.¹⁸ The number of children and women affected by this practice was unprecedented.

To facilitate the implementation of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, particularly Article 142 and 144, on 15 December 1920 the League's Assembly invited the Council to establish a Commission of Enquiry to investigate conditions in Turkey, Armenia, Asia Minor and adjacent territories as they affected deported women and children. Article 142 recognized that, from 1 November 1914 until 1918, the Turkish regime had applied forced conversion to Islam as a widespread tactic. The Article also required Turkey to co-operate with the Mixed Commissions appointed by the League to search for and liberate those people 'in order to repair so far as possible the wrongs inflicted on individuals in the course of the massacres perpetrated in Turkey during the war'.

However, because of a lack of diplomatic relations with the territories concerned, the League didn't nominate a Commission but three persons, namely Karen Jeppe in Aleppo and W. A. Kennedy and Emma Cushman in Constantinople. In addition, the member-state governments were obliged to provide them with adequate assistance. According to the commissioner's estimates, 90,819 Armenians had been reclaimed by 1921, but an almost equally large number of Armenian women and children—73,350—remained in Turkish institutions and homes.¹⁹ The humanitarian work by the League's commissioner Karen Jeppe was carried out in the Rescue Home in Aleppo. As Syria was placed under a French Mandate, it allowed the Aleppo Rescue Home to continue to function. The works carried out by Emma Cushman and Dr. Kennedy in the Constantinople Neutral House and the fate of this organization was more challenging, due to the political and military success of Kemalists.

The League of Nations and Armenian Refugees: the First Involvement

The League of Nations' founding document didn't contain any provisions concerning specifically refugees. Articles 23 to 25 dealt generally with social issues (e.g. fair and humane conditions of labour, just treatment for indigenous peoples, traffic of women and children, traffic of opium and other dangerous drugs, trade in arms and ammunition, prevention and control of disease, and the promotion of Red Cross organisations). The legal framework for the

¹⁸ LNA, Deportations of Women and Children in Turkey, Asia Minor and Neighboring Territories, Report presented by the Fifth Committee to the Second Assembly, A.127.1921.

¹⁹ LNA, Work of the Commission of Enquiry with regard to the deportations of women and children in Turkey and Adjacent Countries. Note by the Secretary General, A.127.1921.

League's humanitarian enterprise was formed later through the organisation's resolutions and decisions.

The League's first humanitarian endeavor was performed in the spring of 1920, when it was involved in the repatriation of over 400,000 prisoners of war in Russia and Central Europe.²⁰ Soon thereafter the organization had to test further its notion of humanitarianism: the organization was faced with the sharp necessity to deal with the Russian refugee crisis.

At its meeting held on 27 June 1921, the Council, with a view to solve the problems involved by the influx of Russian refugees, appointed a High Commissioner to co-ordinate the actions of the governments and private organization in the various interested countries. Fridtjof Nansen was appointed High Commissioner for refugees. In September, Nansen set up an office in Constantinople. Soon, the organization was faced with the necessity of expanding its humanitarian mission to include Armenians. With the collapse of the Treaty of Sèvres, the defeat of the Republic of Armenia and the installation of a communist regime on its former territory, as well as the rise of Kemalism in Turkey denying the Armenians a right to return to their homelands, the survivor-refugees of the Armenian Genocide scattered around Europe and the Middle East had the potential to become a new humanitarian crisis. According to contemporary data provided by the President of the Armenian National Delegation,²¹ the number of the Armenian refugees in the Near East and Europe was approximately 340,000, with roughly half living in refugee camps near the big cities of Syria and Lebanon (150,000 in Syria, 120,000 in Greece, 20,000 in Bulgaria, 2,000 in Cyprus, 12,000 in Palestine, 8,000 in Mesopotamia and 20,000 in Central Europe).

During the League's 3rd Assembly, Nansen reported on the dire condition of Armenians and Greeks arriving in Constantinople from Smyrna and Broussa. He requested the Assembly's permission to use the High Commissioner's Constantinople office to assist those people. Having heard Nansen's statements regarding the critical situation of more than two hundred thousand refugees from Asia Minor, at its meeting of 19 September 1922 the Assembly adopted a resolution recommending that the High Commissioner be authorized to utilise the services of the Russian Refugee Organization to administer money collected for this

²⁰ LNA, Records of the Eleventh Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Plenary Meetings, Text of Debates. Geneva 1930, p. 156; see also M. Housden, 'When the Baltic Sea was a "Bridge" for Humanitarian Action: the League of Nations, the Red Cross and the Repatriation of Prisoners of War between Russia and Central Europe, 1920–22', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38 (2007) pp. 61–83.

²¹ Armenian National Delegation was a legal representative of Armenia during Paris Peace Conference, and continued its activities in Europe after the conference.

new purpose, it being understood that the League accepted no responsibility for Armenian refugees, that the work for the Russian refugees would continue without hindrance and that the Armenian project be of only a temporary nature.

So, on this vague basis, the League became involved in the issue of Armenian refugees.

In 1923 the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees began negotiations with the aim of providing League-administered travel documents—Nansen Passports—to Armenian refugees as a legal solution to their status as refugees.²² The issue was further discussed between the Legal Section of the League's Secretariat and the Armenian National Delegation, with the result that Armenian refugees were divided into 5 groups:

1. Refugees who left the Ottoman Empire with Ottoman passports before and after the war until the Mudros armistice. Their passports were in force for 1 year, although Consular Services refused to prolong them.
2. Refugees who fled the Ottoman Empire after the Mudros armistice with their documents and passes provided by the Allied Powers. These documents were not passports.
3. Refugees who fled the Ottoman Empire with passports provided by the representative of the Transcaucasia Armenian Republic in Constantinople. The Armenian Republic ceased to exist because of the establishment of soviet power there. Thus, the passports provided by them had lost their validity.
4. Nearly 100,000 refugees who fled Asia Minor rapidly in the autumn of 1922 and who had no documents.
5. Refugees to whom the Turkish Government provided passports with a notice that they 'will not return to Turkey', when they left Turkish territories.

In June 1924 Nansen offered to transfer the League's activity in respect of refugees to the International Labor Organization (ILO). The reflected new circumstances and perceptions concerning refugees. In particular it was felt there was a need for a permanent body to deal with issues including labour, unemployment, settlement and immigration. So 1924 was marked by a

²² Fifty four states agreed to recognize those travel documents issued to Russians, and 38 later also acknowledged those held by Armenians.

division of roles: the League retained the political management of refugee affairs while the ILO assumed day-to-day responsibilities.²³

In a report made during the 7th Assembly (1926), the High Commissioner and the ILO addressed the precarious situation of the thousands of the Armenia refugees in the Near East and asked the Assembly to provide some expenses for a small mission to co-ordinate and develop various efforts to establish Armenian refugees in Bulgaria, Greece and Syria. After hearing these reports, the Assembly asked the Governing Body of the ILO and High Commissioner for Refugees to cooperate and consider any effective measures for the permanent settlement of Armenian refugees. According to the Assembly's resolution of 25 September 1926, a special committee was set up in the ILO (Chief of the Refugee Service), headed by Nansen's former deputy T. F. Johnson, to deal with Armenian refugees.²⁴ Moreover, the Assembly requested member-governments to apply the definition of Armenian refugees adopted as part of the intergovernmental arrangement of 12 May 1926, which was as follows:

...any person of Armenian origin formerly a subject of the Ottoman Empire who does not enjoy or who no longer enjoys the protection of the Government of the Turkish Republic and who has not acquired another nationality.²⁵

On 10 December 1926, the Council of the League adopted a resolution which limited the activities of the High Commissioner to persons who had become refugees 'as a consequence of a War and of events directly connected with the War'.²⁶

Thereafter, finally in 1930 an International Refugees Office was established under the authority of the League to organize humanitarian assistance, with the League's Secretary General assuming only the legal protection of refugees.²⁷

The League's first settlement scheme for Armenian refugees was the Establishment Plan in Soviet Armenia or the Erivan Plan. In September 1923 the League was asked to assist in the settlement of 50,000 Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia.²⁸ The number of Armenian

²³ Kevonian, p. 444.

²⁴ LNA, The records of the 7th Assembly Plenary Meetings, Geneva 1927.

²⁵ League of Nations, *Arrangement of 12 May 1926 relating to the Issue of Identity Certificates to Russian and Armenian Refugees*, League of Nations, Treaty Series Vol. LXXXIX, No. 2004.

²⁶ LNA registry N. 20C, 16983, 16983.

²⁷ LNA, Records of the Eleventh Ordinary Session. Plenary Meetings, Texts of the debates. Geneva 1930, p. 157.

²⁸ F. Nansen, *Armenia and the Near East*, New York 1976, p. 5.

refugees who had fled to Russia from Turkey was estimated at about 400-420,000.²⁹ The League's Assembly invited the ILO and Nansen to investigate the feasibility of the plan, adding an additional Francs 50.000 to the refugee budget. The Soviet governments of Armenia and Russia agreed to offer assistance. As a result, an expert committee visited Armenia, which found the settlement project 'technically sound and commercially possible'.³⁰

However, the ideological and political rivalry between the two systems—capitalism and communism—prevented the project's implementation. The Western states were reluctant to finance projects which would assist the rebuilding of the Soviet Union, notwithstanding the official statement that any loan would have to be guaranteed by a Soviet bank, because no such institution was regarded as trustworthy.³¹ For their part, the Soviet leaders thought they saw a catch the project, fearing it as an attempt to infringe on their domestic affairs. As a result, after long negotiations and despite heroic efforts on the part of Nansen, in 1929 the Assembly rejected the project. Meanwhile, during the period 1925–36 nearly 12,000 (7,000 more refugees in France were registered to be transferred to Erivan) Armenian refugees³² were settled in Soviet Armenia. (Soviet statistics provide a much larger number reflecting the possibility that the Soviet government provided its own assistance).³³

In the course of investigating the settlement project to Soviet Armenia, in 1926 the High Commissioner of France in Syria called on the League to collaborate with local authorities in the final settlement of the Armenian refugees there. The project was assessed to be cheaper than the Erivan project. That same year, the League decided to send a mission to Syria to investigate the project's feasibility. Finally, the League came down in favour of the Syrian plan, evaluating it as more realistic than the Soviet one.

The settlement of Armenian refugees in Syria: the First Phase

Syria was a territory entrusted by the League of Nations to France as a Class A Mandate with Beirut being the French Government's administrative headquarters. The territory of Syria covered an area of over 60,000 square kilometers and had a population of nearly 3,000,000, of

²⁹ Société des Nations Journal Officiel, Supplement special N38, Geneva 1925, pp. 89–91.

³⁰ League of Nations Official Journal, 7th year, N 9, p. 1340.

³¹ Housden, *The League of Nations and the Organization of Peace*, p. 71.

³² LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1936, Official No. A 23.1936.XII. p. 9.

³³ For more on this see M. Arzumanyan, *Nansen and Armenia*, Yerevan 1986. (in Armenian)

whom about 1,500,000 were Moslems, 500,000 Christians and the remainder Druze³⁴ and unclassified people. More specifically, there were about 150,000 Armenians, the majority of whom arrived after the Great War.

During 1920, the mandated territory of Syria was divided into four separate states: Greater Lebanon, Aleppo, Damascus and the Alouite state. In 1921 a fifth state was created in Jebel Druze, while in the north the Sanjak Province of Alexandretta had virtually autonomous power within the Aleppo state. In 1925 Aleppo and Damascus were formed into the united state of Syria. In 1926 Greater Lebanon was constituted an Independent Republic with a Senate, Assembly and a Lebanese President. About this time the new Republic of the Alouite state voted in favor of continuing its independent status; its name, however, was to be changed to 'West Syria' and its inhabitants were to enjoy Syrian nationality. In 1926 Alexandretta, with its newly elected council, declared Sanjak independent. However, this was later revoked and Sanjak continued to be included in the Syrian state.

As noted, a major portion of the Armenian Genocide refugees—nearly 125,000 people—was concentrated in and near the major cities of Syria and Lebanon, Aleppo and Beirut in particular. According to League data, there were 55,000 Armenian refugees in Aleppo state (with 25,000 in the city of Aleppo); 15,000 were in Damascus state (13,000 in the city of Damascus); 10,000 in Alouite state; 5,000 in Alexandretta; and 40,000 in Great Lebanon (22,000 in Beirut).³⁵ In Beirut and Aleppo, the authorities assigned lands to these refugees, where they were settled in huts, forming overcrowded, unhealthy and dangerous camps.³⁶ This posed a real threat to the security of the refugees and the surrounding populations, not least by creating poor sanitary conditions likely to result in epidemics.

By the mid-1920s, it had become clear that returning home to Anatolia was no longer an option for the Armenian refugees, as the right to approve such a process fell to the Turkish Government alone. According to the Turkish law of 23 May 1927, former Ottoman subjects who had not returned to the country by that point lost their Turkish citizenship.³⁷ Meanwhile migration to Soviet Armenia remained difficult and so occurred on only a limited scale.

³⁴ The Druze is a monotheistic ethno-religious community in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan.

³⁵ Société des Nations Journal Officiel, Supplement special N38, Geneva 1925, *Rapport de M. Carle sur la Situation des Arméniens en Syrie*, pp. 92-94.

³⁶ LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1935, Official No. 22.1935.XII, p. 9.

³⁷ B. Der Matossian, "The Taboo within the Taboo: the Fate of the 'Armenian Capital' at the End of Ottoman Empire", *European Journal of Turkish Studies*. At <http://ejts.revues.org/4411>

Nonetheless there were nearly 400,000 Armenian refugees in Armenia, which was a real shock to a state with a population of just 800,000 population.³⁸ On balance, therefore, the refugees preferred either to stay in the Near East or else to emigrate to Europe or America in search of better living conditions.

Most importantly, Article 30 of the Treaty of Lausanne gave the Armenian residents of Syria an opportunity to gain citizenship of that country.³⁹ Thus, these Armenian refugees at least had a legal basis for integration into the Syrian state.⁴⁰ French local authorities gave this article due legal power.⁴¹

The existence and uninterrupted flow of Armenian refugees near the big cities of Syria and Lebanon created a real problem for the French Government. The huge influx of refugees to Beirut resulted in some social and health issues; but the shortage of shelters and their poor condition compelled masses of refugees to travel to the peripheries of the city. By June 1922 the number of the Armenian refugees in 4 camps near Beirut was over 8,000 (Quarantaine, 5–6,000; Gueundereli, 4,000; Mar Mitz, 500; Foire camp, 1,000)⁴² and it was increasing daily. Beirut's major camp of Beirut—'Grand Camp', Adana Camp or Saint Croix Église Camp—was divided into 2 parts, each having their own director appointed by the Armenians.⁴³ The shelter issue was ameliorated by the assistance of French military authorities, which provided barracks and tents to the refugees.⁴⁴

The Aleppo camps were less visible. In 1925 half of the refugees lived in the city, while the poorer ones moved to peripheral camps, namely Sulejmanie, Hamidie and Ram (where there were more than 13,000 refugees in nearly 3,248 barracks). The living conditions in these camps were awful. For instance, each person was allocated just 3.5 sq. meters as a living space.⁴⁵

³⁸ However, from 1921 to 1925 Soviet Armenia accepted nearly 13,500 refugees, who came directly from Turkey, or from Mesopotamia, Iran and Greece.

³⁹ Turkish subjects habitually resident in the territory which in accordance with the provisions of the peace treaty is detached from the Turkey will become ipso facto, in the conditions laid down by the local law, national of the State to which such territory is transferred.

⁴⁰ Société des Nations Journal Officiel, Supplement special N38, Geneva 1925, *Rapport de M. Carle sur la Situation des Arméniens en Syrie*, pp. 92–94.

⁴¹ V. Tachjian, *Des camps de refugies aux quartiers urbains: Preocessus et enjeux*, in *Les Armeniens 1917–1939*. La quete d'un refuge. PUSJ 2006, p. 116.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 119.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–22

⁴⁴ Société des Nations Journal Officiel, Supplement special N38, Geneva 1925, *Rapport de M. Carle sur la Situation des Ar éniens en Syrie*, pp. 92–94.

⁴⁵ Tachjian, p. 124.

Until 1925 there were 18,000 Armenian refugees in Damascus. That year a Druz revolt led to a sharp decrease in the number of Armenians around the Syrian capital (over the 12 month period, probably the number stood at about 6,000). These insecure conditions forced any new waves of refugees to move to Beirut and other places so that by the end of 1929 the number of the Armenian refugees in Damascus didn't exceed 13,000. These people were settled in Bab-Touma, Bustam el Salib (Kassa), Abarra, Bab Charki and Merdje.⁴⁶

At first, France didn't welcome the settlement of Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon. However, its authorities decided to try to benefit from establishing them by accommodating them in a strategic plans. There were, actually, several reasons why France participated in this initiative. The overall aim was to strengthen the French presence in its mandate territories and it was also felt necessary to have a strong Christian element among the Muslim community, mostly settled by Arabs. So, the Armenians were settled separately to prevent their full assimilation with the Arab population.⁴⁷ The Armenians were reliably anti-nationalist and favoured the mandate regime in the region.⁴⁸ Another reason was connected with the fact that Armenian refugees were moving to France from Syria and Lebanon in considerable numbers and France wanted to stop this migration.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the policy of settling Armenian refugees in Syria raised a number of concerns from both the Turkish and, more occasionally, the French sides. At the beginning of 1926, when the French High Commissioner had already consented to the Syrian settlement scheme, the Secretary General of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs compared the settlement of the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon with plans to settle Jews in Palestine, pointing out that the project could result in the creation of a small Armenian state.⁵⁰ For its part, Turkey was very much concerned with the settlement of Armenian refugees in areas bordering its territory since doing so might create a pro-Armenian movement there. There were fears that such a strategy would only cause trouble for Turkey and so an offer was even made to France to settle the refugees in a remote colony. Fearful of possible future developments, Turkey

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 126.

⁴⁷ Prof. Watenpaugh however argues that the separate settlement of the Armenian refugees was an humanitarian action towards the Armenians.

⁴⁸ K. Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, Princeton, 2006, pp. 211–308.

⁴⁹ According to the mid-1936 data, the number of the Armenian refugees in France was 63.000. LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1936, Official No. A 23.1936.XII. p. 12.

⁵⁰ Tachjian, p. 128.

appointed an inspector general to its western provinces and nearly 100,000 Turkish peasants from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were to be brought in to strengthen the Western Provinces of the Republic.⁵¹

In 1926, as mandatory power of Syria, France invited the League's High Commissioner for Refugees to participate in solving Syria's refugee problem.⁵² The president of the ILO Albert Thomas was an active promoter of the Syrian project and pushed it ahead as an alternative to the Soviet plan because it was less dependent on circumstances. The same policy was advocated by French representatives in Geneva and Paris.⁵³ Proponents of the Syrian Plan also wanted to use the funds collected for the Erivan scheme for the settlement of Armenian refugees in Syria. The project received a positive response from the international community and once it had secured the co-operation of the of Lord Mayor's Fund, Friends of Armenia, Save the Children Fund and other charitable organizations, the League decided to agree to involvement in the Armenian Question.

The official engagement of the League can be dated from 25 September 1926—during its 7th Assembly. In its proposal, the 5th Committee recommended that the Administrative Council of the ILO and the High Commission for Refugees investigate possibilities of settling Armenian refugees located in the Near East. A Joint Armenian Committee was set up in accordance with this resolution (Nansen was chair, Thomas was vice-chair and other members were drawn from Phil-Armenian organizations based in various countries),⁵⁴ which had to work in close cooperation with France.⁵⁵ By the request of the Committee, T. Johnson visited Syria in December 1926.⁵⁶

The League of Nations' involvement with the settlement project, then, was in response to poor condition in refugee camps and because of the difficulties encountered when it came to settling Armenians in the Soviet Union. Mr. Bournier was nominated the League's special

⁵¹ LNA, Registry N 20C, 16983, 16983.

⁵² LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1935, Official No. 22.1935.XII.

⁵³ For more on the French policy see D. Kevonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire, Les acteurs européens et la société proche-orientale pendant l'entre deux-guerres*, Sorbonne 2004.

⁵⁴ French, Belgian, Italian Phil-Armenian organizations, 'Save the Children' Fund, Armenian Lord Mayors' Fund, Friends of Armenia and the Society of Friend, International Committee of the Red Cross, Near East Relief, International Near East Association, British Armenian organizations, Central Committee of the French Red Cross.

⁵⁵ LN Official Journal, Special Supplement N 69, Records of the 8th Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates, Geneva 1928, p. 87.

⁵⁶ LN Official Journal, Special Supplement N 54, Records of the 9th Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates, Geneva 1927, p. 469.

representative authorized to co-ordinate refugee settlement actions. On 31 December 1926 the French High Commission established the Central Committee for Assistance to Armenian Refugees (CCAAR), which consisted of different organizations and institutions. The CCAAR opened offices in Beirut, Aleppo and Alexandretta. So, the issue of the settlement of Armenian refugees came under the authority of the League / ILO and French High Commission for Refugees, with considerable additional being given by different additional charitable organizations. The implementation of the plan included the purchase of land, the construction of homes and finding employment for refugees (including professional apprenticeships, the provision of small business and agricultural loans).

The Settlement of Armenian Refugees in Syria: the League of Nations' Efforts

According to Johnson's reporting, out of 90,000 Armenian refugees in Syria, 40,000 lived in camps, with 12,000 being in a precarious situation and another 28,000 having only casual employment.⁵⁷ In an attempt to improve the situation, a committee for the establishment of refugees was created in Beirut, consisting of the High Commissioner for the mandated territory, representatives of local authorities and Mr. Buriner (acting on behalf of the High Commissioner for Refugees and the Joint Armenian Committee). Sub-Committees of the Beirut Committee supervised work in Aleppo and Alexandretta. To secure close liaison with the refugees themselves, actual settlement operations were placed under the supervision of Moses der Kaloustian.⁵⁸

The settlement plan for Armenian refugees in Syria was developed by the combined efforts of the League and the mandatory state. The plan had two main strands: the construction of rural colonies in Beirut, Aleppo and Damascus, also the creation of agricultural colonies in the Alexandretta Sanjak and in southern Levant—namely Antioch and the Amok Plain, Massyaf in the Alouite area and Deir el-Zor, all of which had a preliminary cost of £120,000.⁵⁹ The settlement plan foresaw that these colonies would be built only for Armenian settlers. Financial loans to the refugees would be refunded in annual installments (with urban settlers

⁵⁷ LN Official Journal, Special Supplement N 54, Records of the 8th Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates, Geneva 1927, p. 469.

⁵⁸ An Armenian, who had a widespread influence and popularity among the Armenians since war, when he organized an exodus of a large number of Armenians to Cyprus.

⁵⁹ LN Official Journal, Special Supplement N 59, Records of the 8th Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates, Geneva 1927, p. 80.

making the repayment in 5 years and agricultural counter-parts being allowed between 7 and 10 years)⁶⁰. The returned money would then be made available for loans to other refugees.⁶¹

The first step was to move 20-40,000 refugees from the temporary camps. It began with the purchase of two areas near Beirut (14,500 and 9,000 sq. km). By December 1929, 25 facilities had been constructed and over 200 families had moved in. Every facility was divided into 8 flats, each with 2 rooms, a small kitchen, sanitary arrangements and a corridor. The construction of these new urban centres continued during 1927-30, which enabled Armenians to be settled in the following new quarters: White Houses, Parcelle N 603, Hajashen and Karm Zeytoun. The Lebanese government provided Francs 3 million to support the project.

Urban settlements were located just outside the city and comprised two main districts, Armenia and Ashrefieh. By the end of 1929, 189 houses had been completed here and 131 were under construction, leaving 190 more to build to complete both districts. A third site was also being prepared for building. The Armenia district was the first urban settlement built by the League and consisted of 20 apartment houses, each with eight three-room flats and a garden. These apartments became home to 160 families, sheltering well over 1,000 people. Each refugee was given some money to purchase his plot of ground and after a year he had to begin repaying the loan according to the terms of the land-purchase contract. Materials for building the houses were supplied by M. Burnier's architect.⁶²

In Aleppo the CCAAR bought 51,300 and 60,000 sq. km of land near Armenian camps in Sulejmanie, to which nearly 2,500 people moved in 1929. Meanwhile, a new suburb composed entirely of refugees was in the process of springing up outside the city. Armenians from other quarters of the city also purchased plots in the area to build houses and shops. The quarter was well served by the new electric trams, which were an innovation in Syria. By the end of 1929, 420 houses had been built, sheltering 500 families, and 80 more houses were under construction by the League. The houses were built of soft lime stone, which was easily worked and very reliable; the color was a rich cream, giving the buildings a fine appearance.⁶³

In 1929, the Nansen Office bought 15,000 sq. km of land in Bab Charqui, Damascus, which become home to 737 refugees. Urban settlements in this city were not so problematic

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1936, Official No. A 23.1936.XII. pp. 9-10.

⁶² LNA, Registry N20C, 19136, 16983.

⁶³ Ibid.

because the number of refugees was more manageable. Soon, 120 houses were built, and 80 more were under construction.⁶⁴

Alexandretta was partly rural and partly urban. Settlement of the latter area progressed slowly. However, on the main road, outside the town on the way to Antioch and Aleppo, 35 houses were completed quickly, and others soon were under way. Those houses were detached and had good-sized gardens.⁶⁵

So, by the end of 1929, nearly 8,000 Armenian refugees had been moved to new quarters in Beirut, Aleppo, Alexandretta and Damascus; but to alleviate the pressure of refugees on towns, the League also had organised seven agricultural enterprises. Although these villages became prosperous, there were not enough funds to construct as many villages as necessary. The village Kirik Khan on the Amok Plain was partly rural and partly urban. Each refugee was given a plot of land on which to build a house and to cultivate a vegetable garden. They were also given fruit-growing land a little outside the village. Forty-two families were established in this way.

Soog Sou was a purely rural venture, involving the settlement of about 250 people in 50 newly-built houses. Sixty families were settled in Abdul Heuk and seventy families in the village of Haiashen. Djub Ramle, a village in Massyaf Alouite country, saw thirty-three families being established quickly followed by another 25. The country was full of rich and fertile valleys and had generous supplies of water. Hence it had good agricultural potential.⁶⁶

Each agricultural colony was headed by a *mudir*, who had the powers and the duties of a mayor. He was assisted by a council of three members who were elected by the villagers. They were responsible for the establishment and organization of the colony, as well as for the maintenance of order and discipline. They were also charged with the reimbursement of financial advances made to settlers.⁶⁷

The success experienced during the first phase of the settlement work was connected with the reimbursement of the money provided to the refugees. According to G. Burnier, during 1920–30 the material situation of the refugees was not bad. Work was abundant and well-paid. Living in huts, and paying no taxes or rent, the Armenians were able to accumulate some

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ LN Official Journal, Special Supplement N 69, Records of the 8th Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates, Geneva 1928, p. 87.

savings. The first refugees succeeded in building their houses almost entirely with their own resources; others bought land and received building materials repayable in four or five annual installments. Up to the end of 1930, the financial contribution of the refugees to their final settlement was such that the camps were expected to disappear almost entirely by 1933.⁶⁸

However, from the start of 1930, the settlement scheme was hit by the world economic crisis. There was a shortage of work, wages fell dramatically and many workers sacked or experienced significant pay cuts. These consequences were twofold: on the one hand, the League was compelled to invest more in the settlement projects; on the other hand, refugees became unable to meet their monthly re-payment obligations.⁶⁹ Furthermore, although it was decided to terminate the settlement work by the end of 1933, the precarious situation of the Armenian refugees as a result of the economic crisis made an adjournment of the closure process until the years 1934–35.

The second phase of the settlement scheme was characterised by the active involvement of Armenian organizations.⁷⁰ Armenian refugees formed associations and started to implement local, national and international projects, also to run fundraising events. The resulting funds were used to buy land as well as to construct schools and churches. In 1930 the Armenian Benevolent Union joined the settlement plan under the League's leadership.

From 1930 the efforts of the Nansen Office were concentrated on Bourj Hammoud (Beirut), where it was intended to construct an Armenian city with a population of 18–20,000 people. The Nansen Office provided Francs 400,000 for the purchase of land and the construction of houses. The plan was greatly assisted by the Armenian leadership. In 1930 the construction of 3 new city-centres had started near Beirut—Nor Hadjin, Khalil Badawi and Les Pentes. The new settlements of Trad, Nor Adana, Nor Sis, Gullabachen, Parachen were also constructed with the financial assistance of the Nansen Office and G. Burier.⁷¹ As a result of all this work, by 1935 only 1,000 families were left in Beirut's three camps. Aleppo's refugees were also on their way to new quarters. By the end of 1929, 30,000 refugees were settled in new houses, although 10,000 refugees remained in nearly 2,400 camp barracks. Financial support was obtained through the Nansen Office to acquire lands near Nor Kiugh. Starting from

⁶⁸ LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1935, Official No. 22.1935.XII.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Tachjian, p. 134.

⁷¹ Ibid. pp. 136–38.

1935, new lands were purchased by the Armenian leadership in the Cheikh Maksoud, Achrafie, Djabrie and Sebil quarters to settle the remaining 10,000 refugees.⁷²

Despite the active settlement work, in 1935 about 2,200 refugees remained in 450 barracks in Damascus.⁷³ By the next year there were still about 1,050 families in the Aleppo camp, 1,000 in Beirut and 550 in Damascus. 833 families required rapid assistance but hadn't been able to take advantage of the settlement loans made through the League because their conditions of life were so poor that they would not be able to reimburse the money. Thereafter, the refugee office appealed to international and national Phil-Armenian organisations to raise money (nearly Swiss Francs 80,000) to assist these refugees. By the end of 1935, the office had assisted more than 30,000 refugees to settle either in urban quarters or agricultural colonies, all at a cost of French Francs 11,355,132.⁷⁴

Conclusion

According to the resolution of the League of Nations Assembly made on 30 September 1938, the Nansen Office had to cease its activities by the end of that year.⁷⁵ In effect, that year the office's work on refugee settlement in Syria had come to an end. The National Armenian Relief Union, with financial assistance from the office, was instructed to build the final dwellings for the most indigent refugees. Before the office was closed, it managed to contribute a further sum of Swiss Francs 21,000 to assist with work such as this.⁷⁶

So, the Armenian refugee settlement plan in Syria was almost at an end. Despite all the difficulties, the majority of Armenian refugees had been able to leave their camps and move to new homes, so putting the end to a dark period of their lives. An unfortunate few, however, had to remain living in camps until the 1950s. Nonetheless, the humanitarian work of the League of Nations on behalf of Armenian genocide survivors and refugees was fundamental to the survival of the community. Its initiatives transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Armenians, enabling them eventually to begin to shape their futures for themselves.

⁷² Ibid. 142.

⁷³ Ibid. 145.

⁷⁴ LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Report of the Governing Body for the year ending June 30th 1936, Official No. A 23.1936.XII. p. 9-10.

⁷⁵ LNA, Nansen International Office for Refugees, Official No. A.19. 1939, XII.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by State Committee of Science MES Republic of Armenia, through research project № SCS 11B–6a057 ‘The League of Nations and Armenia in 1920–1929’.

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