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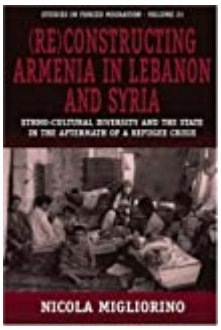

Nicola Migliorino. *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis.* Forced Migration Series. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007. Tables. 256 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-352-7.

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Armenian Communities in Lebanon and Syria: The Same Origin, Two Different Paths?

In *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria*, Nicola Migliorino provides a comprehensive narrative of the formation of Armenian communities in Lebanon and Syria (the Levant) while tracing the political development of these two intertwined colonies during the Mandate period. Migliorino situates these narratives within a broader analytical framework that deals with the question of cultural diversity and incorporation, particularly the various options that immigrants may have aside from simple assimilation and exclusion. Migliorino asks, "Does the case of the Armenians in Lebanon and Syria tell us a different story, of how a community of 'different' people can successfully 'find its place' in the contemporary Middle East without being either assimilated or excluded?" (p. 4).

Migliorino explores this question from three main perspectives. The first focuses on the historical background of the formation of Armenian communities in the Levant, which Migliorino calls a "refugee story" (p. 2). The second discusses the different dimensions and meanings of the presence of those communities, namely, "nationalism in exile" and "diasporic transnationalism" (p. 3). As part of this diasporic perspective, Migliorino compares the host states, Syria and Lebanon, in terms of their approach to ethno-cultural diversity. Up to this point, he notes, diversity in the Middle East generally has been analyzed "with the tools of ethno-politics and ethnic conflict theory, and mostly from the perspective of the state, the political system, or the regime" (p. 3). Migliorino points out that the Armenian communities in the Levant present an interesting case in that they are neither a threat to nor a primary strategic resource for those states. At this point, he proposes a different ethno-political approach as a third perspective. His new approach entails the study of the Armenian communities in the Levant on the basis of their distinctive cultural identity and their interaction with the broader social, political, and cultural structure of the host societies.

Within this framework, this book is composed of five main chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter discusses mainly the historical background of the origins of Armenian presence in the

Levant. The Armenian community grew rapidly during the First World War, when there was a mass exodus of Armenians to Syria and Lebanon brought about by the genocide in the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, Migliorino notes that "the migration and displacements seem to be a distinctive feature of Armenian history from old to modern times" (p. 9). As a direct consequence of the ongoing waves of Armenian refugees after the genocide of 1915-16, the modern Armenian community in the Levant was formed. Migliorino discusses this process rather briefly and does not go into any details about the genocide and its impacts on the refugees.

In the subsequent four chapters of the book, he traces the development of the Armenian community in the Levant in conjunction with the political history of Lebanon and Syria, that is, from the years of the French Mandate to the present. Migliorino's periodization marks the common turning points of both Lebanese and Syrian societies, namely, the French Mandate (1920-46); the postindependence phase until the end of the 1960s (1946-67); the period between 1967 and 1989; and lastly the period since the 1990s. A chapter is devoted to each period, allowing Migliorino to discuss continuities and changes in community-state relationships between the Armenians and government authorities by analyzing six dimensions of these relationships. These include "religion and the religious policy of the state; the Armenian participation in public life; the production and diffusion of Armenian culture and cultural policy of the state; Armenian education in the context of national education; Armenian associations and the state policy on the civil society; and the economic and class dimensions of the Armenian presence" (p. 5). In each chapter, Migliorino evaluates the Armenian communities on the basis of these six dimensions. It is interesting to note that in each chapter he changes their ordering according to the importance of the role that dimension played in that period. In this sense, in terms of the formation and preservation of a distinct community identity, the religion/church and the political structure have played the most decisive roles in each period. Among them, he notes that the political bodies, namely, Armenian political parties, have gradually surpassed the church, which, however, has maintained its traditional position as the representative of the Armenian people. Armenian educational institutions and associations that have been tied either to the church or to political parties have also played a very important role in consolidating Armenian communities in the Levant.

Throughout these chapters, Migliorino makes an argument concerning the divergent approaches of Lebanon and Syria to this culturally distinct Armenian community. In this sense, he discusses the political development of both countries, which diverges especially in the postindependence period. Since the 1950s, Syria has followed a much more authoritarian statist path, while Lebanon has adopted a "power-sharing, consociational political model" (p. 4). This divergence has led to two different paths of development for Armenian communities in each country. On the one hand, the Armenian community in Lebanon has flourished on many counts, including all dimensions that Migliorino analyzed in this book. In his words, "from an Armenian point of view, Lebanon could be undoubtedly regarded as a success story" (p. 147). On the other hand, the Syrian case presents a different and much more disadvantageous path for the Armenian community, namely, the virtual disappearance of Armenians from public life in Syria. These two paths changed the development of the character of the Armenian community within each society as well as between them. In the immediate postindependence period we see the beginnings of a migration wave from Syria to Lebanon. After the 1970s, however, the direction was reversed: the achievements of Armenians in Lebanon were significantly damaged due to the civil war, which resulted in the exodus of almost half of the Armenian population "to the countries of the Western world," whereas the Armenian community in Syria has enjoyed a relatively stable period since then (p. 165). As the title of the fifth chapter summarizes, the Armenian communities in both countries has faced a "difficult recovery and uncertain future" since the 1990s (p. 179).

In sum, Migliorino gives a detailed picture of the experience of the Armenian communities in Lebanon and Syria from the 1920s to the present. In doing this, he answered his main question, posed at the beginning of the book, in the following way: "The Armenians appear to have successfully maintained, for more than eight decades since their mass-resettlement in the Levant, a distinct identity as an ethno-culturally diverse group, in spite of being a relatively small minority within a very different, mostly Arab environment" (p. 221). At the same time, he offers a vivid analysis of the evolution of two post-Mandate states, Lebanon and Syria, concerning primarily their approaches toward ethno-cultural diversity wherein he sees the main possible deadlock for the future of Armenian communities in the Levant. In his words, "this book suggests that neither in Lebanon nor in Syria does a sustainable or consistent model for the accommodation of ethno-cultural diversity appear to be in place" (p. 222). In light of this, Migliorino argues that

it is mainly within the framework of such concepts as "cultural rights" or "rights to diversity" that a sustainable approach can be genuine.

Migliorino's book includes numerous detailed tables pointing to various aspects of the Armenian presence in the Levant, ranging from the number of refugees, to the number and location of schools, churches, Armenian members of Parliament, associations, journals, etc. These tables make it possible to trace changes in Armenian life in both countries over time. Such socioeconomic data are also complemented by the "impressionistic and anecdotal material collected through interviews and personal visits" (p. 198). Migliorino also consulted a broad literature on Armenians as well on Lebanon and Syria, in English, French, Arabic, and Armenian. However, he would have done well to translate the French quotations into English.

The main criticism I have of Migliorino's book lies in the author's "conceptual analysis," which proves unconvincing in a sense that it is very much confined to an analysis of the political history of the host countries. Regarding the development of the Armenian communities in those countries, the book lacks any rigorous conceptual tools. This is surprising, since the concept of diaspora as an analytical tool has been developed quite intensely in the humanities and social science disciplines over the last decade. It has been used for a much longer time with reference to traumatic experiences of Jews and African slaves. Later on, new cases of genocide and expulsion, like Armenians during World War I, and the waves of millions of other people displaced by forced and voluntary migration, have increased the number of diasporas. It has been argued that "the term [diaspora] has lost its stigmatic connotation and on the contrary it turned out to be a resource for identity politics."[1] The Armenian case has occupied a critical role within diaspora studies, first as an example of "Victim Diaspora" and then as a resource of identity. Therefore, the experiences of the Armenian community in the Levant would have been an interesting case for the studies of diaspora and transnationalism. Although Migliorino makes some references to the study of Khachig TÃ¶lÃ¶lyan, a prominent scholar of diaspora studies, and discusses the shift of the Armenian community's self-perception from a "nation in exile" to a "permanent transnational diaspora," he does not employ these concepts in detail (pp. 124, 180). This main deficit also weakens his claim to be studying the Armenian identity as a distinct identity in the Levant.

Nevertheless, in spite of these critical remarks, this book makes useful reading for those who are interested in Armenian communities dispersed around the world and in the Levant specifically. It would be my hope that Migliorino and other interested scholars will continue to follow through on the important themes addressed by this book.

Note

[1]. Rainer MÃ¼nz and Rainer Ohliger, eds., *Diaspora and Ethnic Migrants: Germany, Israel and Post-Soviet Successor States in Comparative Perspective* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 3.