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Fashioning the Armenian City in Lebanon: Anjar as a Microcosm of Lebanese-Armenian Identity

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Abstract. The town of Anjar in Lebanon is a microcosm of Armenian-Lebanese identity. This article analyzes how the politics of space in Anjar reflects a double necessity: on the one hand, the preservation of a traumatic memory of the 1939 displacement from Musa Dagh, forced resettlement and resilience; on the other hand, the adaptation to the highly volatile political environment of the Bekaa Valley, which requires fluid alliances and negotiations with multiple local actors. The article provides a brief history of the urban development of the town with its unique design, as well as the lengthy processes of identity-building, affective investment, and memorial practices that remain relevant to this day.

Keywords: Armenian diaspora, Lebanon, Musa Dagh, Bekaa, urban planning.

1. Introduction

The "spatial turn" in geography and political studies at the end of the twentieth century emphasized the analysis and understanding of geographical spaces as a social construction, a product of political relationships, and as a representation that morphs over time. According to this theoretical frame, power balances and political processes should be considered in their spatial dimension, looking at the forms and tools of the actual control of a place, and at the construction of meanings that are connected with identity and the definition of the Self and the Other (Di Peri and Meier 2023).

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This approach has significant heuristic relevance in Lebanon, where the political system is defined as a form of power-sharing based on the allocation of parliamentary seats and senior offices in the public administration along confessional quotas. Throughout the twentieth century, the consolidation of this system has been predicated upon a complex pattern of social practices, including the appropriation and segmentation of space by sectarian actors that either fought or sought in multiple ways to create and maintain physical borders and symbolical boundaries among the different groups that make up the Lebanese mosaic (Meier 2013).

As noted in previous works (Mazzucotelli 2020; Mercadanti 2022), the peculiar case of the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon is defined by the combination of a diasporic condition, which is interlaced with nostalgia and tension towards the idea of a dual homeland, and the concomitant status as one of the constituent groups of Lebanon's institutionalized sectarian system and social fabric.

Through a history of vicissitudes, contentious politics and civil conflict, the Armenians of Lebanon were engaged in the construction of their own distinct urban spaces (Nalbantian 2013; Nucho 2016), showing a political agency that defies reductionist representations of them as powerless refugees or simply as a marginal minority group (Nalbantian 2018).

In this article, we consider the history of the settlement of Anjar, in the Bekaa valley of East Lebanon, from its foundation in 1939 to our days.[1] It is our intention to show how the planning and subsequent developments of the town can be fully understood only in connection with the (ongoing) debate over the construction of the hyphenated Armenian–Lebanese identity and its position within the country's sectarian landscape. Despite its quite small resident population, Anjar is particularly important in the imaginary of the Armenians of Lebanon because it is still seen as the beacon of Armenianness and a living symbol of steadfastness that preserves the memory of the 1915 armed resistance against the Ottoman deportation ordinances.[2] However, the location of Anjar also presents numerous political and security-related challenges that have a profound impact on representations and self-perceptions.

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[1] In this article we use a simplified transliteration form for placenames and personal names in Armenian and Arabic. For the sake of consistency, we use the name Musa Dagh (Musa Dağı in Turkish) rather than the Armenian Musa Ler; Bekaa in lieu of Biqāʿ; and Haouch Moussa instead of Hawsh Musa. Lebanese names are written according to the most widely used French-based phonetic transliteration. Armenian names are written according to the Western Armenian standard.

[2] This article is also based on field trips carried out in January 2017, and on interviews and video messages collected on 22/23 April 2023. We heartfully thank Arpi Mangassarian for the precious help and indefatigable civic commitment.

The aim of this article is to show how the politics of space in Anjar reflects a double necessity: on the one hand, the preservation of the cumbersome load of a traumatic memory of displacement, forced resettlement and resilience; on the other hand, the adaptation to a highly volatile political environment that requires fluid alliances and negotiations with multiple local actors.

In order to prove our point, we first provide a brief history of the urban development of the town and the rationale behind its foundation. We then proceed to explore the affective investment in Anjar that was carried out by Armenian political and religious actors through the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, we stress the importance of the politics of memory and memorial practices that remain relevant to this day. We later compare these narratives with the uneasy neighborhood relations that connect Anjar with its unstable environs, prompting a constant redefinition of what it means to be Armenian in the borderlands of Lebanon. Finally, we want to point out how the management and conceptualization of space in Anjar helps to understand some political and cultural dynamics within the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon.

2. From the "mountain of Moses" to the "enclosure of Moses"

The town of Anjar was founded in September 1939 over a cluster of pasture and grazing lands known as Haouch Moussa (literally "the enclosure of Moses"), in the eastern Bekaa valley, at close distance to the main road between Beirut and Damascus. The site chosen for the new settlement lies in the foothills of the arid slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, but very close to the fertile central section of the Bekaa. As one the major agricultural areas in the entire Levant, the Bekaa was annexed in 1920 to the French Mandate of the "Greater Lebanon" in order to ensure the food security of Beirut and its coastal region after the devastating famine that occurred during World War I (Traboulsi 2012, 75–87).[3]

The attachment of the Bekaa to the new mandatory administration was fiercely contested and open to negotiations as late as of 1926. Focusing on the nearby area of Rashaya, Bailony (2018) shows how the entire valley was in a condition of administrative and military instability during the first years of the Mandate, and how the spillover of the 1925 Syrian uprising (generally known as the "Great Syrian Revolt") transformed the volatile borderlands of the Bekaa into "a crucial site for the making of the Lebanese nation".

[3] On the causes, effects, and aftermath of the wartime famine see Tanielian (2012).

The consolidation of the French mandatory rule resulted in a profound political and social upheaval in the region. The late Ottoman elites, which included a cartel of the seven most influential families in the nearby city of Zahlé and some absentee landlords who owned large tracts of arable land, were sidelined. A new, pro-French elite gained political prominence through the establishment of patronage schemes and bought agricultural property in order to make it profitable and connected to the main entrepôt of Beirut (Chaoul 2012).[4]

The genesis of the settlement in Anjar should therefore be seen through the prism of French colonial anxieties: on the one hand, the securitization of the porous demarcation between Lebanon and Syria and the political and economic integration of the Bekaa within the French Mandate of Lebanon; on the other hand, a growing concern about the concentration of Armenian refugees in the working-class neighborhoods of Beirut, where many of them had played a crucial role in the rise and consolidation of the Communist Party (Madoyan 1986).

The new town of Anjar was founded in order to settle in the countryside a few thousand Armenians that fled the Musa Dagh (literally "the mountain of Moses") after it was ceded from France to Turkey in 1939. Earlier in 1936, the Franco–Syrian Treaty of Independence had foreshadowed the recognition of a Syrian sovereign state, and ignited tensions over the status of the district of Alexandretta, which had been granted an autonomous status according to the 1921 Treaty of Ankara between France and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Although the French mandatory authorities had previously made it clear that the district (which included the Musa Dagh area) was part of Syria, the Turkish government exerted increasing pressure on France in order to obtain a "distinct status" that was theoretically motivated on ethnic grounds. Turkish claims were bolstered by the worsening security situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the French need to appease the Turkish government (Sanjian 1956).

The increased autonomy of the district of Alexandretta was actually a process of annexation-in-the-making, predicated on pseudo-historical justifications (such as the reference to the Hittite civilization) and conflicting reports on the ethnic composition of the district (Yérasimos 1988).[5] On 2 September 1938, an elected assembly proclaimed the independence of the

[4] As in other parts of the Levant, including Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, the acquisition of arable lands was regulated by the 1858 Ottoman Land Law, which had tried to clarify property rights and increase agricultural productivity. The intentions of the legislation were hindered by the severe shortcomings in land registration, cadastral surveys, and grant of land deeds.

[5] The 1936 French census data showed that Turks and Arabs (divided among Sunni, Alawites, and Christians) were almost similar in numbers, while the slighty less than 25,000 Armenians accounted for 11% of the total population.

ephemeral State of Hatay, which, in the lead-up to World War II, was formally incorporated into the Republic of Turkey on 23 June 1939 (Yilmaz 2006).

The Armenian inhabitants of the Musa Dagh villages had led an armed resistance against the Ottoman troops in the summer of 1915,[6] and had lived for four years in the tent camp of Port Said, in Egypt, before having the chance to return to their villages under French military protection, reconstruct their homes and resume their activities. In anticipation of the eventual annexation of the region to Turkey in the summer of 1939, and prompted by the deterioration of the political and economic conditions after the proclamation of independence of the State of Hatay, religious and political Armenian leaders pleaded with the French authorities to help the population leave the Musa Dagh and relocate to areas under French rule. Although several hundreds decided to remain, most notably in the village of Vakef (today known as Vakıflı), slightly less than 8,000 fled between 15 and 20 July 1939 to the beach of Ras al-Bassit, right beyond the border with Syria (Shemassian 2012).

One of the demands of the Turkish government was to avoid the settlement of the Musa Dagh refugees near the border, where the town of Kassab remained an Armenian ethnic pocket on the Syrian side. The French mandatory administration considered several options in different parts of Lebanon. All of them had in common a geographical location in the foothills of mountains and on the edge between arable lands and pastures used by semi-nomadic tribes. Most importantly, all the options considered were located on the fault line between Christian-majority and Muslim-majority areas, as apparently the resettlement of Armenians was seen as a potential factor of stabilization and conflict mitigation. Ultimately, however, the French authorities negotiated with a former Ottoman officer the purchase of a land estate called Haouch Moussa.[7] The relocation from Ras al-Bassit to Tripoli on ships, then to Riyaq by train, and finally by trucks took place in the first half of September 1939. According to the official data, at the end of the year the refugees amounted to slightly above 4,500 (Shemassian 2015).

Memories of the arrival in Anjar are shrouded in survivalist narratives that describe the conditions of bare life in makeshift tents as an ordeal, and the place as "a desert" or "barren plains".[8] In fact, the most

[6] The events were fictionalized in the novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel, published in Berlin in 1933.

[7] Different secondary sources describe the size of the purchased estate as 1,540 or 1,800 hectares. These numbers seem unlikely given the real extension of the settlement. It might be possible that the land was actually measured in dunums.

[8] This narrative is clearly outlined in the website Mousaler–Anjar, managed by the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation. See https://mousaleranjar.org/en/foundation/83-survival-the-first-years. Accessed on June 4, 2023.

severe problem was not the scarcity of water, but the poor drainage that turned the flat sections of the valley into a swamp: malaria, typhus, and insect-borne diseases decimated the population in the first two years of the resettlement (Edwards 2023).

The original plan, devised by the French High Commission department for public works, consisted of an eagle-shaped urban layout with six distinct neighborhoods that reproduced the six main villages of Musa Dagh: Khodr Bek, Bitias, Haji Habibli, Kabusiye, Yoghun Oluk, Vakef (Paboudjian 2006, 277–279; Aprahamian 1989, 41–43).[9] The plan had to be downsized because of the shortage of funds and commodities caused by the outbreak of World War II, as well as the limited manpower available. Women, children, and the elderly were lodged in the nearby villages (both Christian and Muslim) for the winter, while the construction works proceeded under the guidance of master civil engineer Hagop Keshishian and lieutenant Movses Der Kaloustian.[10] A few hundred houses (significantly smaller than in the original master plan) were ready by May 1940, and the remaining were finished in March 1941. Different sources provide slightly different figures, but it is plausible to estimate that a population of a little above 4,500 was eventually hosted in 1,068 new buildings (Shemassian 2015; Shemassian 2017, 128; Koushakdjian, Madourian 1970, 502; Paboudjian 2006, 283).

The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Apostolic Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, and several other Armenian and non-Armenian charities and philanthropic organizations in Middle East, Europe and North America generously contributed to provide money, food, and other basic goods. This financial and organizational support helped to speed up the construction of houses, schools, and churches belonging to all three Armenian religious denominations: Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical (Shemassian 2017, 142).[11]

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[9] See Սանճագի հայոց համար *Sanjagi hayots' hamar* [For the Armenians of the Sanjak]. *Zartonk*, 17 September 1939; Նոր Մուսա Լեր *Nor Musa Ler* [New Musa Ler]. *Zartonk*, 23 January 1940.

[10] A native of Yoghun Oluk and a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Der Kaloustian had played an important role in the uprising of Musa Dagh in 1915 and in the establishment of the Armenian Legion that supported the French army in the 1918–1920 Cilicia campaign. He then was a member of the Syrian parliament between 1927 and 1937. After the independence of Lebanon, Der Kaloustian was a member of the Lebanese parliament between 1943 and 1972 (Migliorino 2008, 94–95; Peltekian 2017, 203).

[11] The Armenian Apostolic community originally held its liturgical services in a large tent that also served as school. A new dedicated building was opened in 1941. In 1960, Catholicos Zareh Payaslian inaugurated the St. Boghos church. The "Haratch" school was later flanked by a kindergarten and the Gulbenkian College. The Armenian Catholic community inaugurated in 1940 a school for boys, another for girls, and a kindergarten, as well as a communal building. The church building was inaugurated in 1954 in the presence of Patriarch Krikor Bedros

Throughout the entire process of displacement and resettlement, village-based and kinship relations, political party membership, and religious affiliation had been preserved. The master plan for the new town actually supported village-based clusters, replicating in the new geography of Anjar the same communal institutions and lifestyles that defined life in Musa Dagh (Greenshields 1981).

According to Verdeil (2010, 31–49), the housing policy towards the Armenian refugees is one of the forgotten achievements of the French Mandate in Lebanon. Most histories of Mandate-era urbanism focus on the urban development plans in the metropolitan area of Beirut and their ultimate failures. In Lebanon, the French imprint was far from remarkable, unlike what happened in Syria and in North Africa, where the control of urban spaces for security reasons was a critical factor in planning and zoning. The resettlement of the Armenian refugees, on the other hand, benefited from the combination of the political interest of the High Commission, the pressure of local religious and secular actors, and the financial support from the diaspora. This "emergency urban planning" was defined by a clear sectarian dimension and a marked operational pragmatism, which however was less than linear.

In the next section, we show how the end of the construction works, and the resumption of religious and educational activities in proper buildings, did not translate into a seamless life in Anjar.

3. Building the identity of Anjar

The identity of Anjar was far from being settled in the early years after its foundation. The political rivalry between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Tashnag*) and the Social Democratic Party of the Bell (*Hnchak*) was intense in the interwar years in Musa Dagh and was transposed in Anjar at the end of the resettlement. According to Shemassian (2015), at least forty families affiliated with the Hnchak left the camp of Anjar as early as of April 1940, unwilling to live under the domination of the Tashnag, and moved to Rashidieh and al-Buss, two other refugee camps that had been created in the southern city of Tyre between 1936 and 1937.[12] French

XV Aghajanian. The Armenian Evangelical community established its school in 1940 and its church in 1941, with further educational venues being added after 1955.

[12] Following the 1948 *nakba*, the remaining Armenians in the camps around Tyre were relocated again to Anjar, while Rashidieh and al-Buss accommodated the Palestianian refugees that had flown from the region of Acre in Galilee. See https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/rashidieh-camp and https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/el-buss-camp. Accessed on June 11, 2023.

authorities were particularly concerned by the spread of Communist propaganda, and expelled some alleged ringleaders as of October 1939.

The clash between opposed political views was at the heart of the "repatriation" (*nerkaght*) project that was devised by the Soviet Union after the end of World War II (Yousefian 2011).[13] The idea of a relocation to Soviet Armenia, redefined as the promised land, the mother of the diaspora, and the very cradle of Armenian culture (Ter Minassian 2007, 92–93; Nalbantian 2020, 71–74), entailed an acute confrontation among different notions of homeland, patriotism, and definitions of Armenianness. According to the figures reported by Armenian sources, more than five hundred families from Anjar enrolled in the lists of those who left Lebanon towards Soviet Armenia between 1946 and 1947, more than those who actually remained in the newly-founded town (Sanjian 2003, 295).[14] The movement of population opened the question of who should occupy the houses and plots of land vacated by those who had left (Koushakdjian, Madourian 1970, 507). Rumors of vacant houses attracted several Palestinian refugees who tried to settle there in the summer of 1948, prompting significant clashes with the Armenian population. In the end, the intervention of the Lebanese army drove the Palestinian refugees away from Anjar. The latter ended up in the former French army barracks known as Wavel camp, at the entrance of the nearby city of Baalbek (Sciocchet 2022, 65–66; Sayigh 2005, 23).[15]

According to Katchadourian (2016, 240), further tension arose during the political unrest of 1958, when the Lebanese authorities tried again unsuccessfully to settle other Palestinian refugees in Anjar.

In her comprehensive doctoral dissertation, Aprahamian (1989, 110–133) argues that the inhabitants of Anjar initially embarked upon a project of collectivization of agriculture that was meant to abolish the traditional inequal social system. Fed by ideas of peasant emancipation and pioneer socialism, the Tashnag envisaged in 1939 a complete transformation of the political, social, and economic structures of the resettled population through the collectivization of irrigation, cultivation, and stock rearing, under the direct supervision of a town management committee that was by all means monopolized by the Tashnag.

According to Aprahamian (1989, 135–143) the collectivization of farming and agriculture in Anjar was undertaken for both ideological

[13] On 21 November 1945, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR issued Decree No. 2947, allowing the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia to coordinate the repatriation of Armenians residing abroad.

[14] See https://tinyurl.com/kuyzx4wx (shortened URL created and accessed on June 11, 2023).

[15] See also https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/wavel-camp. Accessed on June 11, 2023.

and practical motivations, and bore a striking resemblance to the *kibbutz* system, as both were forms of small-scale planned economy that operated in a competing and non-socialist environment, while aimed at building a new egalitarian society.[16]

Personal rivalries inside the Tashnag proved detrimental, as well as the paucity of provisions for collective land-holding rights in the Lebanese legal system. As early as of 1943, all land and property were privatized through a fixed criterion based on the number of family members. Most parcels were turned into lots for small-holding cultivators who partook in a system of petty commodity production within a broader context of marginal capitalism. By 1947, the management committee was replaced by an elected municipal council, with one member for each of the original villages of Musa Dagh. De facto, power remained steadily in the hands of the Tashnag (Aprahamian 1989, 150–155, 177–185, 195–199).

The aspiration to a classless, egalitarian community, defined by the absence of labor exploitation, was combined with the project of a homogenized Armenian national consciousness that was based (among other factors) on the adoption of Standard Western Armenian as a common language that was meant to supplant other commonly used languages (first and foremost, Turkish) and local Armenian dialects. This language policy was supported by all religious and political actors, and was seen as a necessary measure in order to rally the Armenians of Lebanon and consolidate their specific identity, which was otherwise at risk of assimilation (Nucho 2013).

The "Dialect in Refuge" project by Narod Seroujian and Cynthia Nahhas, based on oral interviews,[17] shows that the dialect (*parpaṛ*) of Musa Dagh and Anjar, called *Kistinik*, is today in a "moribund" (*mahamerc'*) state, as a result of decades of priority being given to instruction in Standard Western Armenian as part of a wider education project aimed at the formation of a solid and consistent Armenian identity. Sources quoted in the documentary by Seroujian and Nahhas recognized the positive nature of the construction of Armenianness through the preference given to the standardized language, but deplored the loss of the Musa Dagh dialect as "a heartaching and painful reality", where the standard language gradually occupied the public space of Anjar and ultimately entered the domestic spaces of everyday familial interaction, threatening the very survival of the particular Musa Dagh linguistic heritage.

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[16] As one of the most influential figures in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Syria and Palestine since 1924, Rouben Ter Minassian played a prominent role in sponsoring the kibbutz model and urging for its application among the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East.

[17] See https://sites.google.com/view/dialect-in-refuge/home. Accessed on June 11, 2023.

All through the 1950s and 1960s, the Tashnag strengthened its hegemonic position in Anjar through the establishment of clubs (*agump*) and saturated the urban space with party references. However, the general decline of the economic conditions in the Lebanese rural contexts, especially in the Bekaa, pushed even more inhabitants to move to the suburbs of Beirut in search of better opportunities.

These remarks help to understand how meticulous urban planning did not automatically translate into a comprehensive, harmonious pattern of social relations, and how the representation of Anjar as a monolithic entity is actually misleading. In the next section, we want to highlight how the politics of commemoration was a crucial part in the process of identity-building and homogenization in Anjar.

4. Anjar as a *lieu de mémoire*

Since the early 1960s, the narrative promoted by the Armenian circles in Lebanon, and not necessarily only those affiliated with the Tashnag, has painted Anjar as a beacon of Armenianness. The patriotic mission of the town has overshadowed the political affiliations and conflicts that we described above. On the one hand, newspaper articles and booklets insist on the national significance of the historical events of the uprising in Musa Dagh, and therefore depict Anjar as a living monument to that act of resistance. On the other hand, these publications emphasize the unique planning and management of Anjar, praising the secluded and (allegedly) self-sufficient nature of the town.

"Compatriotic unions" were, and still are, an important part of the system of Armenian associations in the Middle East. They are usually named after the cities or district of origin in the former Ottoman Empire, and definitely played a central role in the resettlement of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon after the genocide (Nucho 2016, 16; Migliorino 2008, 57). Since their establishment in the 1920s, these compatriotic unions published several memorial books that gather individual and family-based remembrances of the just-lived and more distant past; rural folklore; heroic legends and tales; traditional music, dance, and food recipes; embroidery and village dress patterns. These books aim at tracing and preserving the Armenian heritage of the native villages and passing it down to the future generations.

According to Tachjian, these memorial books are examples of a way of writing history that pays much attention to acts of brave resistance, usually revolving around the 1915 genocide. History is therefore periodized as

before, during, and after the catastrophe.[18]

The "Memorial Book of Musa Ler" (Koushakdjian and Madourian 1970), published by the Compatriotic Association of Musa Dagh, focusses on village traditions and the preservation of heritage. Significant attention is given to episodes of self-defense and battles, as well as the endeavors and challenges that the people from Musa Dagh had to overcome in the foundation of Anjar.

A sense of continuity between past and present is at the core of the periodicals edited by the schools in Anjar. *Shiraz*, the magazine of the Armenian Evangelical College, and *Musa Ler*, the magazine of the Armenian Catholic College, are a case in point. Even though these are not scientific journals with a scholarly standard, such publications are indeed interesting because of the connection they establish between local history and the construction of an Armenian identity. The main focus of the articles, mostly written by students or teaching staff, is the celebration of the heroic past, the preservation of an idea of communal bravery, and the debate in classroom about the transmission of the daring ethos of the fighters of Musa Dagh.

These contents and feelings also transpire in the documentary film *Anjar: Flowers, Goats and Heroes* by Noura Kevorkian, where the entire exercise in oral history is explicitly defined by the intention of transmitting the memories of the last survivors to the future generations, so that the latter will be able to show gratitude and proceed "in the path of the martyrs of Musa Dagh" and of the pioneers of Anjar in its early years.[19]

Beirut-based Armenian newspapers, on the other hand, emphasize the transnational relevance of the events of Musa Dagh as a beacon for the Armenian diaspora, and therefore turn Anjar into a *lieu de mémoire* of those events. A cursory glance at the Armenian press reveals how themes of agency and action, in opposition to passivity and fatalistic submission, were recurrent tropes. This approach was already evident in September 1965, when the fiftieth anniversary of the Musa Dagh resistance was commemorated in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide.[20] *Aztag*, the newspaper affiliated with the Tashnag, proposed a foundational epos that relied heavily on issues of identity and continuity. The city of

[18] See https://tinyurl.com/5e5nmh2k (shortened URL created and accessed on June 12, 2023).

[19] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU8-Fzipovo. Accessed on June 12, 2023.

[20] It is noteworthy that, as well as the anniversary of the genocide, also the anniversary of the Musa Dagh resistance was an occasion for a cautious rapprochement between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the government of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following a proposal of the Musaler Compatriotic Union, a village in the Armavir Province of the Armenian SSR was renamed Musaler in 1972 (Koushakdjian and Madourian 1970, 847).

Anjar, in particular, was presented as a cradle of heroes and future leaders who, having been bred from the spirit of the heroes that had fought the Ottoman troops and overcome all kind of adversities, would be able to awaken the Armenian consciousness.[21]

This sense of continuity is clearly shown in the memorial complex dedicated to the eighteen fighters who died during the Musa Dagh uprising. The complex was inaugurated in 1995 and is an eloquent proof of the connection between memorialization, identity, architecture and space, as it stands next to the Armenian Apostolic church of Saint Paul, which in itself is the most prominent building of Anjar and the focal point of the urban grid. According to the Tashnag-affiliated Mousaler–Anjar website, "the monument was completed when the bust of Movses Der Kaloustian stood next to it in 1998".[22] As noted above, Der Kaloustian had a prominent role in the foundation of Anjar, but he was also one of the military leaders in Musa Dagh and, more importantly, a member of the Lebanese parliament and a Tashnag leader who shaped the relation between the Armenian constituency and the rest of the fractious Lebanese political arena. The memorial complex therefore encapsulates the representation of the heroic past of Musa Dagh and the hegemonic aspiration of the Tashnag party, both in the urban space of Anjar and in the political representation of Lebanon's Armenian public sphere. The image of the ancestral homeland, coupled with a narrative of brave resistance, reinforces the construction of the idea of communal membership and its projection within and outside the borders of the town.

The tropes of heroism, resistance and resilience are also deployed in the depiction of the relationship between Anjar and its surrounding environment.[23]

Insistence on the challenges posed by the original landscape (climate, irrigation, lack of resources, health hazards) and the transformation of the barren land into lush greenery and cultivated fields reinforces a sense of communal pride and achievement that can occasionally be used for gatekeeping and marking the difference with neighboring villages and communities. A pamphlet published for the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of Anjar was dedicated to the consolidation and mobilization of this memory. Through texts and old photographs, the brochure empha-

[21] See Հրաշքը Այնճարի մէջ *Hrašk'ë Ainjari mech* [Miracle in Anjar]. *Aztag*, 10 August 1963.
[22] See https://mousaleranjar.org/en/remembering-mousaler (last accessed on 12 June 2023).
[23] This narrative can be found, among others, in a 2013 article posted by Boghos Ghukasian on the website of the Arab Forum for Environment and Development. The title reads *Hikāyah ʿAnğar* [The tale of Anjar], while the subheading reads *Baladah lubnāniyyah ḫaḍra' bināhā al-arman fi'l-ṣaḥra'* [The green Lebanese town the Armenians built in the desert]. See https://tinyurl.com/3ym3vvct (shortened URL created and accessed on June 16, 2023).

sized the suffering and destitution of the refugees, their dogged determination, their heroic struggle in "a land exaggeratedly described as hostile and deserted", but also their desire to resume a "civilized" lifestyle as soon as possible (Bennafla 2009, 99–100; Nucho 2016, 32).[24]

In the next and final section, we compare this self-perception with the actual reality of the everyday interaction of Anjar with its unstable surroundings, and how its Armenian identity must be constantly renegotiated in politically challenging circumstances.

5. Positive neutrality under stress

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) was fraught with consequences for Anjar, just like the rest of Lebanon. As a prolonged political strife descended into mass armed violence across the country, the nearby city of Zahlé fell under the control of the Christian right-wing Phalanges, while the villages in the central Bekaa were variously contended for by different Palestinian militias, Islamist factions, and the splinter Arab Lebanon Army, led by Ahmad al-Khatib. The Armenian community of Anjar managed to maintain its "positive neutrality" (Geukjian 2007) when the region fell under the control of Palestinian and Arab nationalist groups, and most importantly when most of the central Bekaa was occupied by the Syrian army in 1976. In the summer of 1978, the Syrian troops and intelligence services strengthened their position in Anjar, namely next to the Umayyad archaeological site, and by all means transformed the garrison into the major military headquarter in Lebanon (Aprahamian 1989, 227–229). The relative calm granted by the Syrian military presence pushed thousands of Armenians from Beirut and Burj Hammoud to find shelter among relatives and friends in Anjar (Varžapetean 1983, 353), as also shown in Kevorkian's documentary.

The destructive cycles of violence in the metropolitan area of Beirut, as a result of the Israeli invasion in 1982 and of generalized infighting later on, prompted a real estate frenzy in the Bekaa, particularly along the main highways leading to Syria. The uncontrolled urban sprawl was facilitated by the huge influx of capitals from Syria and the drug cartels in the northern part of the valley. At the same time, the war years were marked by the emergence of a transit economy defined by legitimate cross-border trade, informal economy, and plain smuggling. The eradication of canna-

[24] See also Հերոսական Սուէտիան (Ապատամբութեան 51րդ տարեդարձին) *Herosakan Suedian (Abadampwotʿean 51rt daretardzin)* [Heroic Svedian Armenians (On the 51st Anniversary of the Uprising)]. *Aztag*, 17 September 1966.

bis fields by the Syrian army was not matched by a proper rural development project. On the one hand, a growing mechanization proved beneficial to the agro-food sector (in particular, vineries and dairy farms). On the other hand, the growing liberalization of regional and international trade widened the gap between larger actors who were able to improve their competitiveness (through investments in technology and increased productivity) and small-scale farmers who were literally pushed out of the market (Bennafla 2006).

The combination of these factors wrought havoc on a rural settlement based on small-scale production like Anjar as much as the developments in the security field.

All through the 1980s the Bekaa was a backline in the Syrian strategic concept, especially vis-à-vis Israel. The area underwent a visible process of Syrianization in the public sphere and the labor market in the 1990s. The extensive network of the Syrian intelligence (*muḥābarāt*) was ramified enough to instill fear, but could not curtail periodical outbursts of protest, fueled by Islamist radical factions and drug cartels. Local instability worsened when the Syrian troops and security services eventually withdrew from the Bekaa in April 2005, after having being redeployed there from other parts of Lebanon in 2002. Between 15,000 and 30,000 soldiers and officers vacated the barracks, checkpoints and headquarters that had been built in the previous three decades, signalizing their full control of the place (Bennafla 2007).

The Syrian hasty withdrawal was prompted by the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the ensuing wave of protests that took place in Beirut in March 2005. Political polarization between the pro- and anti-Syrian camps often took a sectarian turn, with the dominant Shi'i parties (Hezbollah and Amal) backing the Syrian government, and most of the Sunni constituency espousing a vehement anti-Syrian line. In the Bekaa, however, the conflict map was shaped by a more complex intersection of actors, issues, and dynamics. Firstly, the presence, albeit residual, of pro-Ba'th Sunni and leftist Shi'i Muslims countered simplistic sectarian schemes. Secondly, although the influence of the traditional landowning families was seen as declining, patronage networks based on aid provision in exchange for unwavering loyalty remained a main asset in local politics. Thirdly, tribal allegiance remained very strong and hardly controlled by national actors.[25]

Signs of an increased sectarianization of spaces, mainly through the construction of religious shrines or the display of insignia and banners,

[25] See the 2015 UNDP Conflict Analysis Report at https://www.undp.org/lebanon/publications/undp-conflict-analysis-report. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

were noticed in several parts of the Bekaa, where borderization processes took place between areas with different sectarian and political leanings (Aubin-Boltanski 2022, 87). However, the typology and topology of conflict was often related more to highway access, water scarcity, long-standing clan feuds, and land property (or a combination of these factors) than to confessional affiliation per se.[26]

A case in point is the controversy that erupted after 1998 between the municipality of Anjar and some Islamic committees based in the neighboring town of Bar Elias over the property of the scanty ruins of an old mosque placed on the top of a hill that overlooks the entrance road to Anjar. The conflict was fueled by the botched condition of the Lebanese cadastral system and the haphazard distribution of proper land deeds by the French mandatory administration to the Anjar residents who obtained parcels of agricultural land in the 1940s. The legal mess allowed the Islamic actors in Bar Elias to increase the scope of their claims, which were originally limited to the place of worship, but soon expanded to the orchards and water sources around the hill. The controversy quickly escalated into acts of harassment, intimidation, and altercation that prompted the Syrian troops to set up roadblocks and checkpoints. According to Bennafla (2009), this situation of low-intensity conflict was preserved by the Syrian authorities in order to position themselves as arbitrators, while at the same time igniting both sides. The Armenian constituency, in particular, found itself in the very uneasy position of not being able to criticize the Syrian troops, from which it relied for its own security.

Lebanese institutions were even more ambiguous and weak in the management of the ongoing crisis. The Future Movement, which has aimed since 2005 at monopolizing the political representation of the Sunni constituency, and the Dar al-Fatwa, as the Sunni religious authority over personal status issues and religious education, tried to assert their own role and discourse, but were too often trapped in the entanglements of Lebanese political schisms.[27] The fragility of the official Sunni establishment paved the way for the rise of extremist Salafi groups, with the nearby town of Majdel Anjar becoming one of the hotbeds for such radicalized actors, as well as a recruitment spot for jihadist fighters.[28]

Since 2012, the spillover of the ongoing Syrian Civil War and the influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in the Bekaa valley

[26] See https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-risk-conflict-bekaa-valley. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

[27] See https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/burden-scarce-opportunities-social-stability-context-central-and-west-bekaa-conflict. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

[28] See the 2022 Lebanon Conflict Analysis at https://coar-global.org/2022/02/17/lebanon-conflict-analysis-central-bekaa/. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

further escalated tensions and posed new challenges to Anjar, where the officially registered population hovers around 8,000, but where the actually residents are estimated to be less than 5,000 because of unemployment and lack of opportunities (Bennafla 2009).

In connection with the soaring economic woes and the deteriorating political stalemate, anti-Syrian and anti-migrant sentiments grew rampant across Lebanon, and particularly in the less affluent areas like Burj Hammoud, where local Armenian residents repeatedly clashed with Syrian, Kurdish, other Asian and African refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. Sadly, it was Anjar who had to bear the brunt of the climate of rising hostility. After protesters in Burj Hammoud called for the expulsion of Syrian and Kurdish workers from the area, several articles and social media comments deplored the attitude of the Armenians, described as ungrateful, isolationist, and oblivious of the hospitality they received when they were refugees. These comments were mostly framed in a very sectarian language, ridden with references to the claim that Anjar was built on land that previously belonged to the Sunni charitable endowment (*waqf*) in the Bekaa and therefore legally inalienable, and even asked what the reaction would be if someone had called for the expulsion of the Armenians from the *waqf* lands.[29]

In this context, the majority of the Armenian public sphere adopted a conservative stance in its relation with both the politics of Armenia and the politics of Lebanon, where the Tashnag was affiliated with the Free Patriotic Movement, Amal, and Hezbollah, while maintaining a patronage network and a mostly utilitarian and opportunistic relation with state institutions (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2018).

In the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary election, held with a new system based on sectarian quotas and proportional representation at the district level, 22 Armenian candidates (17 Apostolic and 5 Catholic) ran for 6 seats (5 Apostolic, 1 Armenian Catholic) out of 128 (Aynilian 2018).[30] The Bekaa I electoral district, of which Anjar is a part, was arguably the most competitive and mixed in the entire country, therefore deciding the final result of the election.[31]

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[29] An example of this narrative can be found in a 2014 article posted on the London-based and allegedly liberal *Elaph* online newspaper. See https://elaph.com/Web/opinion/2014/5/908133.html. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

[30] In the Beirut I district, the Tashnag and Hnchak aligned with the Free Patriotic Movement and won two Apostolic seats, while the Ramgavar aligned with the right-wing Lebanese Forces and the Phalanges and won the Armenian Catholic seat. The remaining Apostolic seat was won by the anti-establishment independent Paula Yacoubian. In the Metn district, the Tashnag candidate, supported by the Free Patriotic Movement, was easily re-elected.

[31] Seven seats were at stake: two Greek-Catholic, one Maronite, one Greek-Orthodox, one Armenian Apostolic, one Sunni, one Shi'i. Registered Armenian voters accounted for 6% of the total in the district.

Because of the very complicated mechanism of seat allocation, the most-voted Armenian candidate, Marie-Jeanne Bilezikjian, supported by the Free Patriotic Movement and the Future Movement, was not elected. It was instead Eddy Demerjian, supported by Hezbollah and the (pro-Damascus) Syrian Social National Party, who obtained the Armenian seat, despite having received only 77 preferential votes. In an even more bizarre twist, Bilezikjian obtained most of her preferential votes in the Sunni-majority areas of the district as a result of being aligned with the (mostly Sunni) Future Movement. The very low turnout in Anjar was an indicator of disaffection with the status quo and the electoral mechanism in particular, as the winner of the Armenian seat was going to be eventually determined by non-Armenian voters (Dagher 2021).

An unexpected development happened in September 2021, when George Boujikian[32], the president of the Development Council of Anjar, was selected by the Tashnag as the new minister of industry in the "national unity" caretaker cabinet led by Najib Mikati.[33] Supported by a new coalition between the Tashnag, the Free Patriotic Movement, and Hezbollah, Boujikian easily won the Armenian seat for the Bekaa district in the latest election, held on 15 May 2022.[34]

6. Conclusions

The history of Anjar encapsulates all the elements that have defined the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon during the last ninety years: forced displacement, survival, resettlement, and the rebuilding of communal life in a diasporic condition. The foundation of Anjar as a planned town, initially based on an idealistic aspiration towards an egalitarian society of pioneers and then turned into small-scale property fit for petty commodity agricultural production, consolidated a sense of vibrant communal identity. The construction of a hyphenated Lebanese–Armenian identity, which was a major issue for all the political, religious, and cultural actors within the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon, coexisted with the preservation of a particular local identity, rooted in the specific history and dialect of the Musa Dagh villages. Even more than in other parts of Lebanon, this process of identity-building was never sorted out once and for all, and definitions of nationhood and homeland remained fluid and nuanced until today (Edwards 2023).

[32] Also spelled as "Georges" and/or "Bouchikian".

[33] See https://www.the961.com/who-is-george-boujikian-lebanons-new-minister-of-industry/ (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

[34] See https://www.lorientlejour.com/elections/circonscription/10-bekaa-i. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

As a place that is strongly and directly connected with the armed resistance of Musa Dagh in 1915, Anjar was the object of narratives and practices of commemoration that praised its significance for the Armenian diaspora and emphasized the values of resilience and steadfastness. However, heroic accounts of brave resistance and patriotic cohesiveness also coexisted with party factionalism and internal divisions in relation to national (Lebanese), regional, and international positioning.

In Anjar, the fluid landscape of alliances and realignments testifies to the continuous attempt, made by community leaders and mass associations, to constantly renegotiate the position and leverage of the Armenian constituency vis-à-vis a highly unstable political environment defined by a multiplicity of actors, security risks, and swinging coalitions based on opportunistic politics.

Despite the signs of normalization of the relations with Syria, the general situation remains bleak: the political crisis that has engulfed Lebanon since 2019, and the abysmal economic and financial crisis prompted by the March 2020 government default, which was made more devastating by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port blast in August 2020, dealt a frightening blow to the Armenian middle class, triggered a severe brain drain, shrunk the size of the Armenian constituency, and therefore had a direct impact on the effectiveness of its religious and political institutions.

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