The expulsion of non-Turkish ethnic and religious groups from Turkey to Syria during the 1920s and early 1930s

A - Context

The main factor in the birth of the National Movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later Atatürk) after the end of the First World War, was the disintegration of the defeated Ottoman Empire and its fragmentation. The movement’s aim was the reconquest of all the former regions in Anatolia that were still under the jurisdiction of the victorious Allies. At the time, when the map of the Middle East was being redrawn by the Great Powers, the Anatolian regions could also have spawned new governments that would be outside Turkish-Ottoman control.

The movement created by Mustafa Kemal under these circumstances (in May 1919) and its proceeding military victories on multiple fronts would open a new page in modern Turkish history. Thus, by the end of 1920, the Turkish Army succeeded in recapturing the Kars and Ardahan regions from the Republic of Armenia. On January 4, 1922, the French governing authorities finally withdrew from Cilicia, so that it once again came under Turkish control. The Greco-Turkish war in western Anatolia that began in 1920 would continue until the close of 1922, this confrontation also ended in victory for Turkey. These military successes opened the doors to the Lausanne Conference for Turkey, where the Turkish side won a political victory to crown all its previous military achievements. As a result, Mustafa Kemal and his supporters succeeded in realising the National Movement’s most important aim: the creation of a Turkish Nation-State on the wide expanses of Anatolia. The Lausanne Treaty (signed on July 24, 1923) officially recognized the creation of this new Turkey and gave it a place on the world stage.

For the founders of the new Turkish State it was just as important to “Turkify” it economically, linguistically and demographically as it was to liberate the land. Indeed, the aim of the leaders was to establish a Nation-State that was based exclusively on Turkish identity. Consequently, the presence of other ethno-national groups, the question of their cohesion and investment in the development of their community became insupportable. This mentality was best expressed by Vehbi Bey, the deputy from Karesi who, on November 5, 1924, announced in the Turkish parliament with regard to the population exchange agreement between Turkey and Greece: “The arrival of every individual is a [source of] richness for us; and the departure of every individual who leaves is a blessing for us!” (Aktar, 2003: 87). These ideals were quickly disseminated throughout the country, especially through the press, schools, the various branches of Mustafa Kemal’s Republican People’s Party (CHP, founded in 1923), as well as through Türk Ocakları, their main propaganda tool (Georgeon, 1982: 192).

It should be noted that, broadly speaking, the creation of Nation-States was a norm in the aftermath of the First World War. This worldwide conflict had destroyed the three multi-national, multi-regional empires: the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist. The disappearance of this political configuration provided the opportunity for the drawing up of new borders and especially the advance of new Nation-States. In the case of the regions of the former Ottoman Empire, the emphasis on national identity was not solely a Turkish peculiarity. It had spread through the other ethnic and religious communities of the former Ottoman Empire, such as the Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Arabs, Kurds and Assyro-Chaldeans. The previous Ottoman order had broken down and the victorious Allies (especially the two imperialist powers Great Britain and France) had divided the region into various spheres of influence in which new self-governing units began to emerge. In this new political order, the various peoples who constituted parts of the former empire wanted, in their
What differentiated the new Turkey from the other peoples that also wanted to create Nation-States, was its leaders' closeness to the ideals of the former Ottoman Empire's leadership – the İttihat ve Terakki (Committee for Union and Progress – CUP). It was during the years when this political party was in power, especially during the First World War, that a new stage in the policy of homogenization and “Turkification” of Anatolia was reached, or more correctly, that it developed a criminal capacity. It was during those years that the CUP put the complete plan for deportation, obliteration and forcible resettlement of non-Turkish peoples into action, culminating in the almost total deportation and extermination of the Armenian people from their ancestral homes in eastern Anatolia, as well as from the many towns and villages of western Anatolia.

The ideal of a homogenous and “Turkified” Anatolia was the aim of the leaders of new Turkey too. This may be considered to be a linear development, bearing in mind that the movement led by Mustafa Kemal was, in many basic ways, a direct continuation of the CUP (Zürcher, 1984: 103-105). Its character was also similar to that of the CUP, there were many people in the movement that had previously been members of the CUP and had basic roles during the First World War, mainly in the implementation of the plans for the forced deportation and massacre of Armenians (Akçam, 2006: 303).

To better understand the general context after the end of the First World War, it is important to consider the increasing antagonism between Ottoman Turks and Ottoman Christians. If we consider the areas that our subject covers, we would see that the capture of Cilicia and other areas further east by the Allies was welcomed with great enthusiasm by the indigenous Christian peoples. They comprised mostly Armenians who were survivors of the genocide. That enthusiasm quickly turned to concrete action. The Allied forces (the British and French) turned this local Christian element into a basic lever in their drive for military occupation. It was this element that provided the manpower for the conquering authorities, both for the civil administration and the military-police organs. Under these circumstances the distance between the Turkish and non-Turkish (especially Christian) populations became greater. It was not surprising therefore that when the Turkish authorities began to expel non-Turkish communities, they frequently referred to the assistance afforded to the French occupying forces as justification. From the Turkish position they were simply suspect elements that could potentially endanger the rule of the newly-established Turkish government and threaten its security.

To complete the picture, we should consider that the French mandatory authorities made every effort possible to achieve their aim of securing and prolonging their position in Syria. The French had ceded Cilicia to the Turks in 1921-1922, but maintained their rule over Syria and Lebanon. It is interesting to see, in the two adjoining countries, the contradictory occupation strategies used, on the one hand by the French and on the other by the Turkish. Although they were diametrically opposed in their methods, they both wanted to achieve the same aims – the secure continuance of their rule. In fact, the French mandatory authorities, in contradistinction to the Turks, did not encourage Arab nationalism in Syria and were deeply opposed to the efforts made to establish Nation-States in their regions based on the Turkish model. The French did however encourage the development of local religious and ethnic group identities. They then attempted to make these groupings their local allies, bearing in mind that the mandatory authorities were convinced that it was the Sunni Arab majority who were opposed to the French presence and interests.

This was also why, during their occupation of Syria, the French authorities were not opposed to the streams of refugees coming from neighboring Turkey or Iraq. These were Assyrians/Syriacs, Chaldeans, Armenians or Kurds who, for various reasons, had left their homes and had found refuge in Syria. The French authorities themselves generally organized the settlement of the refugees. One of the most important of these plans was carried out in Upper Jazira in northeastern Syria. There, thanks to French efforts, new towns and villages were built with the intention of housing the refugees considered to be “friendly”. This meant that the non-Turkish minorities that were under Turkish pressure knew that, no matter how painful and undesirable it was to leave their ancestral homes, shops, fields and property, they could find refuge and rebuild their lives in relative safety on the other side of the border, in Syria.
B - Decision-Makers, Organizers and Actors

The deportation of the non-Turkish minorities who lived in the Turkey-Syria border region was not carried out by the direct orders of the Turkish government. The methods adopted by the Turkish authorities were altogether much more subtle. It appears as if they were reluctant to be considered as being responsible. Multifarious vexations and pressures would begin against the targeted communities, after a while they would become impossible to withstand and would lead to the community’s exhaustion and hopelessness. It was under these circumstances that they would decide to leave their land and find refuge in neighboring Syria.

These methods included:

Press campaigns: attacks would begin against the small non-Turkish communities in the border regions in the local press, especially in the newspapers that were close to the authorities (Türk Sözü, Yeni Adana, Teceddüt, Altun Öz for example). The small communities were portrayed, in nationalistic or xenophobic articles in these newspapers, as enemies of the new Turkish State and demanded that they leave Turkey. At the end of 1922, several newspapers carried announcements that members of these communities had a maximum of one month to leave the country. Posters were put up with the same messages on shops owned by Christians in Cilicia (Tachjian 2004: 196-197).

Pursuit through legal methods was another widespread means of applying pressure. Accusations often concerned the time when the French armies were in Cilicia from 1919 to 1921. Individuals were accused of acts of violence against Muslims, perpetrated in concert with French forces. In other cases, individual Turks would call Christians to the court, accusing them of non-payment of fictive debts. These trials often ended with the seizure of all the accused’s possessions. It should also be stated that lawyers would often refuse to defend Christians (CADN, doc. 1, see bibliography).

The local authorities would also issue orders for the Christian populations of villages to move to the nearest towns. The first aim of these orders was to concentrate these village communities in towns and thus to control them. This was followed by pressure and arbitrary actions aimed at making them leave Turkey. These methods were used especially against the Armenians who lived in the predominantly Kurdish areas around Diyarbekir, Mardin and Siirt.

The following methods were used against them by the end of the 1920s:

In the first stage, Turkish police would inform the local village mayor and town crier that Armenian-owned fields were to be seized by the authorities. They further demanded that the Armenian villagers leave their homes and settle in the towns. Thus an internal movement would begin towards the nearest towns. They were forbidden to sell their flocks or movable assets.

In the second stage, it was impossible for the peasants now settled in the towns to start new businesses or obtain work. The town’s Muslim population would receive word from the local authorities that they shouldn’t provide work for these immigrants either. Thus Midiat, Palu, Mardin, Derende, Malatya, Diyarbekir, Arabkir and Harput (Kharpert) and many other towns became centers with concentrated Armenian peasant populations.

In the third stage, these Armenians, bereft of jobs, accepted the authorities “assistance” to leave Turkey and move to Syria. But for many Armenians, this third stage was the final opportunity for them to be robbed. They were forced to pay large sums to obtain passports, then they had to pay, for example, all their taxes from previous years, be they real or imagined. Finally, their passports would have special hand stamps added, all of them reading: “Forbidden to re-enter Turkey”, “Granted on the condition that the holder doesn’t return” or “Return not permitted” (Tachjian, 2004: 277-278).

Finally, influential people in the towns would call for Christian shops and goods to be boycotted, and
the authorities would do nothing to prevent it. At the same time, non-Muslim employees in Turkish companies (banks and the railways), and occasionally non-Muslim doctors and lawyers, would lose their positions (Aktar, 2003: 92). In Marash in 1922 it was forbidden for Armenians to leave the city and work in the fields. All the Armenian merchants were boycotted in the local markets. Those in skilled trades were only allowed to work provided they had a Turkish partner. This was the first stage in the seizure of their workshops. Direct criminal acts were also recorded when, for example, Armenians in Marash were subjected to insults and stoned (Kalousdian, 1934: 829; Archives of Nubarian Library [ABN], letter from Dr. Khayigian to Dr. Melkonian, April 25, 1922, Beirut). It was the same in Aintab, all the goods sent to market by Christians had to carry a special mark, something that simply obstructed their sale in other places (CADN, doc. 2, see bibliography).

A preliminary examination of these methods of deportation brings to light the fact that its driving forces were the establishments close to the ruling CHP (local newspapers, Türk Ocakları) or local notables. On closer inspection, it is interesting to see that many of these people, and the most important of them, were former members of the CUP who had significant experience in the question of the organization of mass deportations. For instance, Ali Cenani Bey was the Kemalist movement’s most influential personality in Aintab at the beginning of the 1920s and one of the main perpetrators of the expulsion of the last Armenians from the city, in 1922. Later, he was to become Minister of Trade too. He was formerly a member of the CUP and a deputy in the Ottoman Parliament and, during the First World War, was considered to be one of the leading organizers of the Armenian deportations and the seizure of their assets in his area (Kevorkian, 2006: 750-751).

The case of Diyarbekir is even clearer. The main people responsible for the deportation of the Christians in this city in 1924 were considered to be the leaders of the local CHP party – Pirincizade Feyzi, Muftizade Serif Bey, Zulfizade Zulfì and Zia Gökalp. All of them were CUP members, and the first, Kurdish by origin, had been an Ottoman parliamentary deputy; later, in Mustafa Kemal’s day, he had once more been a deputy and held ministerial posts (Tejel, 2007: 15). During the First World War, Feyzi, being the vali’s (governor’s) Dr. Reshid’s main assistant, had a leading role in the massacre of the region’s Christian population. Gökalp was the main ideologue of the same party. As for Serif Bey and Zulfi, they commanded the local militias that actually carried out these massacres (Kevorkian, 2006: 437-440).

Haci Kaya Izolu was a member, during the war years, of the Special Organization (Teskilat-i Mahsusa) that operated in the Mamouret Ul-Aziz region. This organization, being the secret arm of the CUP, had a basic role in the organization of the Armenian Genocide (Kevorkian, 2006: 521). After the war, Haci Kaya was the leader of the local Harput branch of the Kemalist movement that subjected the Christian minorities to perpetual pressure. Many of them were forced to leave their homes and seek sanctuary in Syria (Tachjian, 2004: 259). Haci Mustafa Kamil was formerly a member of the CUP, and directly involved in the massacre of the Urfa Armenians (Kevorkian, 2006: 770). He was later a member of Mustafa Kemal’s party and became the mayor of Sanliurfa. In 1924, he personally called the leaders of the local Christian communities to see him and, through threats, demanded that all the Christian communities leave Turkey (Tachjian, 2004: 262-263).

C - Victims

The communities that lived spread out in the border area and that were the victims of this policy of deportation were many and various. Compared to their state before the war, their numbers had disproportionately decreased, the majority having fallen victim to the CUP’s policy of deportation and massacre during the First World War. It is important, of course, to stress that after the Armistice some of the deportees, the majority Armenians, re-established their homes in Adana province, as well as in the areas further east – in Marash, Aintab and Urfa, occupied by Anglo-French forces. But under the terms of the Ankara agreement of October 20, 1921, Cilicia was transferred to Turkish rule once more and the final French contingents left on January 4, 1922. Consequently, the Armenians left the region too and settled mainly in Syria and Lebanon. The Christian populations of the cities further east were unable to accompany the French Army when it retreated from these areas, therefore a number of Christians remained in Marash, Aintab, Urfa and Kilis in 1922.
There were other places in the border region that had never been occupied by the Allies after the Armistice but where Christian minorities lived. In the large towns (Diyarbakir, Malatya and Harput) their numbers weren’t noticeable, but in the country areas around Silirt, Diyarbakir and Besiri, thousands of Armenian peasants lived in a mainly Kurdish region. Over the proceeding decades they became almost serf-like in relation to the local Kurdish aghas and sheikhs. They were farm workers or artisans, who were, in every sense of the word, dependent on the agha or sheikh who exploited them. At the same time, however, the latter were their defenders, considering that these peasants were a profitable and skillful element, useful to the Kurdish majority.

It was this stability of mutual interests that drove the Kurdish aghas to protect these Armenians from the massacres and forced deportations that took place during the First World War. But at the end of the 1920s, the Turkish central authorities managed to loosen the influence and power of the aghas and sheikhs considered to be the most influential in the region. In other words, these same aghas and sheikhs were now powerless to be the Armenians’ defenders.

It is important to note that for several reasons this article has not taken into account Kurdish emigration from Turkey to Syria during this period. This should however form the subject of a separate study. It is also true that very often these Kurds were members of tribes that lived on both sides of this new and artificial border. Both the Turkish and French authorities tried to enlist the collaboration of these tribes and use them as tools to regulate matters relating to the Turkish-Syrian border that were unsolved. At the same time, Ankara pursued a plan of moving and resettling the Kurds; Kurdish rebellions erupted inside Turkey. Under these conditions, thousands of Kurds fled Turkey to Syria and were settled in Upper Jazira. It is interesting to note too that there is no systematically recorded information concerning the numbers of Kurdish immigrants who entered Syria in the French mandatory authority archives, unlike those of other immigrants arriving from Turkey.

Aintab, Kilis, Marash and Urfa were all cities captured by the Allies (first the British, then the French). When the Allied forces retreated, many Christians were unable to leave with them and remained there, under the new Turkish authorities. Thus about 5,000 Armenians were still living in Aintab by January 1922, more than 5,000 in Marash and about 1,000 in Kilis. A year later, on January 4, 1923, the Armenian population of Aintab was counted as 80 persons, and 10 in Kilis. As for Marash, from November 1, 1922 until March 15, 1923, 5,374 Armenians from that town were registered as crossing the border into Syria (Tachjian, 2004: 217-224). In the case of Urfa, it was noted that there were about 5,000 Christians living in the town, of which 3,000 were Assyrians/Syriacs, 1,500 Armenians and 500 Chaldeans. In 1924, in a very short space of time, from February 10 to April 11, about 4,200 Christians left Urfa and found refuge in Syria (Tachjian, 2004: 265).

After the French departed, Tarsus, Mersin and Adana still had Greek Orthodox families, originally from Lebanon and Syria, living in them who were often great landowners. As we shall see below, the Turkish authorities began to use various stratagems to force them to leave Turkey in order to seize their assets.

Mardin, Diyarbekir, Malatya and Harput were cities never occupied by Allied troops after the Armistice, and continued under Turkish rule. The Christians that lived in them were either those who had not been forcibly deported or deportees that had returned to their homes of their own volition. The pressures put on them and seizures made from 1922 onwards increased. It is for this reason that, from 1922 until the end of 1923, 3,202 refugees, all of them Armenians, left the Harput and Diyarbekir regions and found refuge in Syria (CADN, doc. 3, see bibliography). During the same period 2,666 Armenians emigrated from Malatya and entered Syrian territory (CADN, doc. 4, see bibliography). The expulsions from Diyarbekir from the beginning of 1924 took on greater scope and this time encompassed all the Christian communities. According to the statistics for 1924, the Christian population of the city represented 2,000 Armenians, 1,500 Chaldeans, 1,400 Assyrians/Syriacs and 500 Greek Catholics (CADN, doc. 5, see bibliography). Less than a year later, in January 1925, the Christian population of the city, 545 persons, was assessed (CADN, doc. 6, see bibliography).

Armenians from rural Kurdish areas flowed towards Syria. These were Armenians who lived in
villages around Diyarbekir, Mardin, Bitlis, Malatya and Harput. Many of them formed part of the Kurdish village, and sometimes tribal system. It is difficult to present an overall number for them. According to one source dated 1924, the number of Armenians living in villages in the province of Diyarbekir, that is in Silvan, Hazro, Lice, Besiri, Garzan and Siverek counties, was 8,040 persons (CADN, doc. 7, see bibliography). Although this figure might seem to be exaggerated, the new exodus that began in 1929 demonstrates the relatively dense Armenian population in these areas. Throughout 1929, approximately 4,700 Armenians were registered as entering Syria (Tachjian, 2004: 283). This movement of refugees to Syria continued in 1930, but their entry registries are less clear. We only know that according to the representative of the League of Nations, the number of new immigrants was between 8,000 and 10,000 (CADN, doc. 8, see bibliography).

D - Witnesses

The main sources for this work were the archives of the French mandatory authorities in Syria and Lebanon, held in Paris and Nantes. During the whole of the mandate period, the French authorities had problems settling newly-arrived immigrants. From the French administration’s point of view, they were considered, due to the ethnic or religious group they belonged to, as a necessary and useful element. Their flow into Syria however, especially their settling in the cities, was always opposed by individuals from the local population. The presence of the refugees often inflamed the political atmosphere and there was always the possibility that inter-communal strife would erupt. In other words, the mandatory authorities couldn’t permanently keep Syria’s gates wide open for the refugees, bearing in mind that they were vitally interested in the maintenance of stability and peace too.

The French authorities therefore behaved with the greatest care concerning the appearance of the refugees. They attempted to obtain the most accurate information possible about their numbers, often conducting lengthy questioning of those who set foot on Syrian territory. They tried to find out what the situation was in the places the refugees came from, the state of the remaining minorities there and the details of the pressures exerted and seizures carried out. Thus the mandatory authorities were able to make an assessment of probable immigrations trends. This information could be also used, as necessary, with the object of interceding with Turkey about the question. They even mobilized their Adana consulate to assist in their efforts. Apart from this, and notwithstanding their interrogation of the refugees reaching the Syrian border, the mandatory authorities permanently kept in touch with the representatives of the communities that were being put under pressure and who were in Syria and Lebanon. These last received important information about the events in Turkey, thus the network of communities provided a source of first-hand information.

During these years, the representatives of the Armenian, Assyrian/Syriac, Chaldean, Greek Orthodox and Maronite communities that lived in Syria and Lebanon were often in direct communication with their co-religionists and compatriots living in the Turkish border zone. Also, members of the minorities in Turkey had familial ties to people in Syria and Lebanon. Thus both sides made efforts to maintain communication, usually by mail. For example, a merchant going to Aleppo from Turkey would bring letters that would, through various internal networks, reach their addressees. We should note that this kind of personal letter may be found in the archives of community organizations, which means that in political terms, those containing interesting news and reports were often passed to the community leaders for them to utilize.

Church records (especially in Aleppo) are also, for the same reasons, rich sources. In the first place reports and letters detailing the activities of representatives in Turkey are to be found there. But the church was also directly involved in the work of settling the refugees. Thus information concerning the number of refugees and the circumstances of their expulsion are also to be found in these archives.

There are very few memoirs about this period that are known to us. There are, however, a number of books written by Assyrian/Syriac witnesses and printed in Syria and Lebanon. There are no audio or video recordings. There are some small recollections amongst the Armenians, mostly in books
published by compatriot societies. These books, called “memorial albums”, contain a wealth of information about a particular town or village. In the case of our subject, information may be found in books of this nature published about Marash, Adana, Aintab, Harput and Malatya. Further important sources are the Armenian and Arabic newspapers and journals published during those years, as well as the archives in Geneva of the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

It is noticeable that there has been, in recent years, some academic interest in this border area. Doctoral theses about the 1920s and 1930s have been prepared or are in preparation. But these works do not, generally, directly deal with the expulsion of the minorities. They mainly concentrate on the border issue, French policy in Jazira or problems with the Kurds in the area. In any event, these works are useful in understanding the region, communities living there, political interests and the general atmosphere connected with the expulsions.

E – Memory

It is not possible to say that the expulsions of the 1920s and 1930s created their own memories. It is true that the number of people subjected to pressure exerted by the Turkish authorities was significant, and that the methods used created an important emigrant movement towards Syria. But during the following decades, with the disappearance of the majority of that first generation, the memories of those events have generally faded.

There have been various factors that have assisted in the disappearance of complete memories. First and foremost is it important to note that these changes have remained within the confines of a community, and therefore their means of retaining memories of them were limited. After the independence of Syria and the French withdrawal, a whole movement began with the object of creating an Arab Nation-State. Local historiography was much affected by this movement and a wish for homogenization was noticeable. Local histories of the ethnic and religious communities that make up multi-ethnic Syria were excluded from this historiography. Under these circumstances, it was clear that the expulsions of the 1920s and 1930s would not find a place in government historiography and thus in governmental memory.

It is interesting to note that community memory has not been the place in which these events have been retained. For the two peoples that were the main victims, namely the Armenians and the Assyro-Chaldeans, the greatest catastrophes were the massacres and forced deportations carried out during the First World War. It was during those years that the majority of the Armenians of Anatolia were exterminated and whole areas previously inhabited by them were emptied. The Assyro-Chaldeans in their turn were also subject to this mass violence and suffered great human loss. The memory of these events had an enormous influence on these two peoples, to such an extent that their whole historiography was, and still is, under its influence. The catastrophe is very often used as the point of departure for the description and analysis of pre-war events. But it is interesting to note that subsequent events, such as the expulsions of the 1920s and 1930s are, in collective memory, influenced by the catastrophe.

This is most apparent among the Armenians. The memory of the genocide of the First World War is worthy of special attention and has given rise to a whole literature. In this case, the genocide not only became – especially in the diaspora – an event that has a permanent place in their collective memory, but would also be a date considered a turning point, perhaps the main event in modern Armenian history, thus putting its unprecedented seal on Armenian identity. Subsequently “before the genocide” and “after the genocide” would be heard, leaving the impression that modern Armenian history was divided into two parts. The part “before the genocide” consisted of the Armenians Ottoman past, until the date when many were exterminated and others deported. The life led by refugee Ottoman Armenians in the middle-eastern Arab countries, the Caucasus, Greece and later on in Europe and in the Americas formed part of the “after the genocide” era. The Cilician affair too is not forgotten, tens of thousands of exiled Armenians returned under the auspices of French authority and lived in communities there until the end of 1921, when the region returned to Turkish control and the Armenians emigrated to Syria and Lebanon.
Thus in this simplified yet at the same time generalized collective memory, it may be considered impossible to grasp the movement of refugees into Syria during the 1920s and 1930s. We think this is one of the main reasons why communities do not generally retain the memory of these events.

An important number of these deportees settled in Jazira, a place that, compared to community centers such as Aleppo and Damascus, is a peripheral area. In fact the central cities would often take the view that these new refugee settlements were peripheral. In other words, they were generally overlooked and a certain degree of intolerance was evident. A good example was the “Kurdish-speaking” epithet given to the Armenians arriving in Jazira at the end of the 1920s. With their Kurdish speech and village ways, they were culturally different from the Armenians that had already settled in Syria. They carried this nickname – which was far from neutral – for a long time, differentiating them from their compatriots in Syria and Lebanon.

F - General and Legal Interpretations

It should be noted here that the communities targeted for expulsion were many and varied. There were many different religious and ethnic groups dispersed along the Turkish-Syrian border, with some of them residing in towns while others had their homes in rural areas. In light of this, there were several official reasons for their expulsion.

Generally speaking, the Turkish authorities regard the accusations and criticisms that are aimed at them concerning the question of the expulsions as fabrications. Ankara has insisted that this human movement towards Syria was a free, voluntary emigration from Turkey. In reality the Turkish authorities did not analyze the deportations. Intervention by the Great Powers in this matter was only occasional, and Turkish leaders knew that European governments had neither the will nor the means to intercede on behalf of the expelled minorities (FO, doc. 1, see bibliography). Of course, the Turkish authorities only provided explanations when representatives of western governments directly intervened in this matter, or when the subject was raised in the League of Nations. The side making the criticism often noted that the steps taken by Turkey contravened the rights of non-Muslim minorities (Clauses 38-44). In 1924, for example, the Turkish government, in response to questions about the expulsions of Christians from Urfa, was forced to reply to French diplomats. In the version presented by the Turkish authorities, the local Christians were frightened that neighboring Muslims would make property seizures as a response to the savagery that had been meted out by the Christian militias during the French occupation. Under these circumstances, the Christian notables appeared before the vali and declared that the community wanted to leave Turkey and settle in Syria. The governor tried to persuade them to stay but, upon their insistence, the police eventually decided to take them safely to the frontier (CADN, doc. 9, see bibliography).

It is interesting to see that the expulsion of these minorities was accompanied by the seizure of their assets. In their efforts to “Turkify” their territory, the Ankara authorities tried to appropriate all the Christians owned – fields, houses, shops etc. They were convinced that by this means they could ensure that this element’s departure was permanent and that their community life on Turkish soil would finally end. The Turkish authorities legal arguments concerning asset seizure were much clearer. Indeed, during the whole of the 1920s and 1930s, the Ankara government adopted various laws concerning minorities’ “abandoned property” (emvali metruke) (Tachjian, 2004: 201-216). This was in direct conflict with clause 33 of the Treaty of Lausanne, which stipulated that the Turkish government would return assets that had been seized belonging to former Turkish citizens who became Syrian or Lebanese subjects. In reality, these legal moves by Turkey aimed at eradicating community foundations by seizing their movable and fixed assets. If these methods generally referred to inhabitants who had left Turkey then, they were also directed against non-Muslim individuals still living in the border regions. In other words, these steps were taken to force the remnants of the minorities to emigrate.

This series of laws created a complex and often contradictory legislative framework. A clause considered favorable to minorities would often be made absurd by the promulgation of another or by
a subsequent law. In other words, an obstacle would be found in these ambiguous laws that would prevent a non-Turk from regaining his assets. For example, a law promulgated on April 20, 1922, clarified the fact that the property or assets of those absent would be looked after by the local authorities, and that they would be returned to their owners when they returned to Turkey (MAE, doc. 1, see bibliography). This law, which seemed faultless, in actual fact corresponded with the seizure of assets, bearing in mind that, since 1921, passports had never been issued for non-Muslim minorities, blocking their return to Turkey. This stealthy seizure method became more obvious with the fourth clause of this same law, where it is noted that those people who provided information about apparently abandoned but hidden assets would receive one tenth of their value. Later, according to a law of April 15, 1923, it was forbidden for nominated people to look after these assets. The March 13, 1924 law permitted the government to give a portion of the “abandoned assets” to Turkish citizens (MAE, doc. 2, see bibliography).

This legal system was also inimical to the few religious representatives of the minorities that insisted on living just within the borders of Turkey. Members of their communities had almost completely left the country, while these priests attempted to retain the churches’ fixed patrimony – monasteries, schools, buildings, lands and so forth. This was the case, for instance, of the Maronite and Greek Catholic religious representatives. The local authorities, in the early years, used various forms of pressure with the object of making them leave Turkey. When these methods were seen to fail, it was announced that these assets were considered to be abandoned, bearing in mind that the communities belonging to these two churches no longer existed in Tarsus. In other words, it was considered legal to seize the churches’ assets (CADN, doc. 10, see bibliography). The same methods were used in Mersin and Adana, regarding the Armenian Catholic Church, where a small group of representatives continued to remain in these two cities. Using the same reasoning, the local authorities seized the Church’s assets. The pressure against these priests was later increased (arrests, demands for the payment of large taxes, threats), to such an extent that they were forced to leave Turkey (Tachjian, 2004: 227-230).

Perhaps the most noteworthy example of the utilization the law to assist in the expulsion of these minorities is the case of the Greek Orthodox community (originally from Syria and Lebanon) that lived on the Turkish side of the border. There were about 1,000 Greek Orthodox people living, in 1923, in Mersin, as well as in Tarsus and Adana, who were of Syrian and Lebanese origin (MAE, doc. 3, see bibliography). They were generally extremely rich families that owned extensive areas of land and other valuable assets in Cilicia. They were all Arabic speakers and were part of the Antioch Greek Orthodox Church. The members of this small community were very surprised when, in 1923, they learned that the Turkish authorities had decided to include them in the list of people that were to be exchanged under the terms of the Lausanne Treaty (signed on January 30, 1923 between the representatives of Greece and Turkey). It's true that the agreement covered “people professing the Greek Orthodox faith” in Turkey, but it did not make clear whether it really encompassed the adherents of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Despite every intervention, this disparity was utilized right to the end by the Turkish authorities to gradually despoil the Greek Orthodox Arabic-speaking families of Cilicia of all their assets with the object of seizing their rich lands (Tachjian, 2004: 230-242).

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