

ROUNDTABLE

Ambivalence to Things Armenian in Middle Eastern Studies and the War on Artsakh in 2020

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For decades Armenian studies has been marginalized in Middle Eastern, Turkish, Iranian, and Ottoman studies for political and ideological reasons.¹ Ignorance and reluctance to understand the field also have contributed to this marginalization. Some scholars viewed the field as an archaic one, remote from the above-mentioned fields. Whereas some only thought of Armenian studies as part of Caucasian studies, others did not want to be associated with Armenian studies due to its research focus on the Armenian Genocide, concerned that any such association might endanger their access to the Ottoman archives or be tainted as advocating an “Armenian point of view.” However, in the past two decades the situation has started to change, as a new generation of young scholars, few in number and mostly based in the West (with a few in Turkey), have embarked on diverse research projects to understand the history and the culture of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and the Arab Middle East. Although these have only scratched the surface, they should be welcomed as an honest approach to understanding the history and contribution of the Armenians to the region that goes beyond the approach of “good Armenian, bad Armenian” that was endemic to Ottoman and Turkish studies during the Cold War period.² Although the new trend tends to concentrate on the 19th and early 20th centuries, it should be considered a welcome step.

Armenians of the Middle East—representing diverse, complex, and stratified groups—have left a plethora of primary sources pertaining not only to the history of their own communities, but also to the history of the region. It is time that Western and Eastern Armenian be considered key languages in Ottoman, Iranian, and Middle Eastern studies.³ In addition, it also is the appropriate time to consider these “area studies” as overlapping and intersecting fields and not as clear fields demarcated by geographical or ethno-religious national boundaries. Similar to the recognition that identities are hybrid and fluid, I also would like to promote here the idea that these “area studies” are hybrid and cannot and should not be studied in isolation. Armenians spread across different area studies and multiple disciplines can be hugely illuminating in comparative and broader study and perspectives.

Despite these positive, albeit limited, developments, an important event took place in September to November of 2020 that shook the faith of scholars of Armenian background

¹ Bedross Der Matossian, “Contending Trends in the Armenian Historiography of the Late Ottoman Empire: Inclusion vs. Exclusion,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 53 (2015): 174–80.

² “Good Armenians” was the characterization of Armenians loyal to the Ottoman state and the Turkish Republic; “Bad Armenians” was the label given to the revolutionaries by the Turkish state.

³ More than one thousand periodicals were published in the region in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. For the list visit: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IiO6aBB9H55upxiT54kbB8jMC9Yagip/view?fbclid=IwAR15BB3GI7D3dCDtV1PaL0rBU6Fn5Tl0C7U3cdvFphwmCcsZTUlHFEqZC1Q> (accessed 20 April 2022).

about this seemingly encouraging progress. This event was the Second Nagorno-Karabagh War, which lasted for forty-four days. In this short essay, I will provide a brief overview of the history of the conflict and attempt to understand the ambivalence of scholars in the field and their reluctance to take a stance on condemning the assault against the self-proclaimed Republic of Karabagh by Azerbaijani forces and their allies.

The history of Nagorno-Karabagh (Artsakh in Armenian) and its contested claim has been a major source of contention not only in the historiography but among the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis themselves, leading to two devastating wars that have taken the lives of more than thirty-five thousand people. The history of the region is complex, and I do not intend to delve into all the details. However, what is evident is that in the course of history Armenians have always constituted a majority in the region, with strong historical ties.

The source of the recent conflict goes back to the beginning of the formation of the USSR, which changed the geopolitical picture of the South Caucasus. On July 5, 1921, as part of his imperial policy of “divide and conquer,” Joseph Stalin decided to assign Karabagh to Soviet Azerbaijan as a semiautonomous region, defying the will of the majority of the population to be integrated into the newly formed Soviet Republic of Armenia. Consequently, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was established within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923. Armenians considered Stalin’s move unjust and demanded redress. In the succeeding six decades, Armenians of the region suffered continuous discrimination, displacement, and economic underdevelopment by successive Azerbaijani governments. They insisted that their national rights had been trampled upon and that their cultural and economic freedoms had been suppressed. After Stalin’s death in 1953, the Armenians of Karabagh began to voice their discontent, once more demanding unification with Armenia or Russia. For example, in 1963 Armenians of Karabagh sent a lengthy petition signed by thousands of them to Nikita Khrushchev, the secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, complaining about the systematic maltreatment and discrimination that they had been suffering at the hands of the Soviet Azerbaijani government. Similar to this, in 1967 they sent another appeal to the government of Soviet Armenia and the Central Committee of the Communist Party lamenting the Azerbaijani policies of impeding the economic development of the region, forcing native Armenians to abandon their lands, and relocating Azerbaijanis in their place. They argued that the only remedy to this situation was to attach Karabagh to the Soviet Republic of Armenia.⁴

The situation changed with the decline of the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s. In 1988 a national movement for self-determination began in Karabagh, expressing the clear will of the people to separate from the Azerbaijan SSR and to unite with the Armenian SSR. Their demands were met by a series of pogroms that took place in Sumgait, Kirovabad, and Baku that were orchestrated by the Azerbaijani government. Subsequently, more than four hundred thousand Armenians who lived in Azerbaijan fled to Armenia and elsewhere, and more than one hundred seventy thousand Azeris living in Armenia fled to Azerbaijan. In addition, Communist led-Azerbaijan, backed by the Soviet Army, attempted to force more than one hundred fifty thousand Armenians to leave Artsakh.

The regional government of Karabagh held a referendum in February 1988, and 80 percent of the people voted to secede from Azerbaijan and to join Armenia. The reluctance of successive Azerbaijani governments to respect the will of the Armenians of Karabagh for self-determination led to a bloody conflict which became known as the First Karabagh War (1988–94).

In November 1991, Azerbaijan’s Supreme Soviet annulled the autonomous status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). In response, the Armenians of Karabagh again voted in a referendum on November 27, 1991; more than 99 percent of those voting

⁴ Ara Sanjian, “Irredentism at the Crossroads of Nationalism, Communism and Diverging Interpretations of the Soviet Experience: The Armenian Diasporan Press on Mountainous Karabagh, 1923–1985,” *E-SAS*, 6 January 2022, <http://entriessas.com/articles/armenian-diaspora>.

supported the independence of Karabagh. The situation changed drastically when Azerbaijan and Armenia each declared their independence in August and September, respectively. Karabagh joined them on September 2, 1991, declaring the establishment of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh.

The Armenians of the newly independent yet unrecognized republic, backed by the Republic of Armenia, resisted the Azerbaijani onslaught which began in December 1991. After a war that lasted for years and took the lives of more than thirty thousand people from both sides, the Armenians of Karabakh emerged victorious.

In 1994, the Karabagh Defense Army captured seven districts surrounding the republic with the aim of creating a buffer zone. Azerbaijanis who lived in the seven surrounding districts of Karabagh controlled by Armenians were driven out and became internally displaced persons.

On May 12, 1994, a cease-fire agreement was achieved through Russian negotiations, putting an end to the first war. The period between 1994 and the breakout of the Second Karabagh War on September 27, 2020 witnessed efforts by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group to resolve the conflict. However, sporadic clashes between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis continued. The Minsk Group was created in 1992 with the aim of encouraging a peaceful, negotiated resolution to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵ However, in the course the negotiations, it failed to produce a permanent solution to the conflict. Although the Azerbaijani side asked for the immediate removal of Armenians from the seven districts and the return of Karabagh to Azerbaijani control, the Armenian side insisted that the leadership of Karabagh should have a say in its final status. Although there was some readiness to return the seven districts, they stressed the fact that the independent status of Karabagh was nonnegotiable.

On September 27, 2020, in the midst of a devastating global pandemic, Azerbaijan, aided by Turkey and jihadist militants from northern Syria, attacked the Republic of Karabagh. The war lasted for forty-four days leading to the death of thousands of soldiers and a large number of civilians.⁶ One hundred and eighty-seven Armenian soldiers and twenty-one civilians are still missing, and around thirty-eight POWs remain in captivity.⁷ The infrastructure of the republic was destroyed and 80 percent of the Armenians of Artsakh became refugees in the neighboring Republic of Armenia.

On November 9, the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed a trilateral statement and several previously Armenian-controlled regions were handed over to Azerbaijan. The Armenian side lost the war due to the military superiority of the Azerbaijani army, which was backed by Turkey and equipped with the latest military technology, notably UAVs (drones) supplied by Turkey and Israel. The war not only resulted in the death of thousands of Armenians protecting their homeland, but it also was a major blow to the cultural heritage of Artsakh and to its infrastructure. On October 8, 2020, Azerbaijani forces launched an assault on the 19th-century Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral located in Shushi, the cultural capital of Karabagh, causing significant damage. The cathedral is a masterpiece of 19th-century Armenian architecture and a landmark of Armenian cultural and religious identity.⁸ According to a detailed January 2021 report by the Artsakh Human Rights

⁵ The Minsk Group is cochaired by France, Russia, and the United States; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "Mandate for the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Process, OECD, 23 March 1995, <https://www.osce.org/mg/70125>.

⁶ "Armenian PM Says Almost 3,800 Soldiers Killed in War with Azerbaijan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 August 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-deaths-karabakh-war/31425644.html>.

⁷ "187 Armenian Soldiers, 21 Civilians Missing since 2020 War; Mirzoyan Says 38 Remain POWs," *Asbarez*, 21 March 2022, <https://asbarez.com/187-armenian-soldiers-21-civilians-missing-since-2020-war-mirzoyan-says-38-remain-pows>.

⁸ "Azerbaijan: Attack on Church Possible War Crime: Investigate and Hold Those Responsible to Account," Human Rights Watch, 16 December 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>.

Defender's office, 161 churches and monasteries have come under Azerbaijani control.⁹ Vandalism or destruction of Armenian monuments has become the norm.¹⁰

During the war, Armenians around the globe launched a massive fundraising campaign that helped 80 percent of the Armenian refugees who left the war zone in Karabagh find a safe haven in Armenia. At the same time, with limited resources they tried to raise awareness in the international media about the plight of the Armenians of Karabagh. However, they were shocked to witness the anti-Armenian rhetoric and pro-Azeri bias in the Western media. The desire of the Armenians of Karabagh for self-determination is a fundamental principal of human rights, which they had been denied for decades and for which they had paid a dear price. Whereas the West has backed regions such as Kosovo in asserting its right to self-determination, it was reluctant to do so in the case of Karabagh. Although Armenia has nothing to offer to Europe in terms of natural resources, Azerbaijan, led by the authoritarian regime of President Ilham Aliyev (r. 2003–), has leveraged its energy resources and soft power to silence the international community and the world press regarding its unprovoked war against the Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh.

It was noteworthy that over the course of the war the international academic community remained mostly silent, despite the uproar of scholars with either Armenian descent or close ties to the region. There seemed to be an ambivalence about what was happening in the South Caucasus. As the war did not take place within the clear geographical parameters of the Middle East, it seems that it did not deserve the attention of Middle Eastern scholars either. However, the war was a turning point for Middle Eastern studies scholars with Armenian backgrounds. Many of those scholars who have been committed and active (often at professional or personal cost) in other just causes, ranging from solidarity with the Palestinians to the Kurds of Turkey, suddenly found they had no reciprocity from their activist communities. Even prominent Armenian Genocide scholars of Turkish descent failed to raise their voices and condemn the war amid “fears of reprisal” from the Turkish government, which was directly involved in the war. It seemed that dealing with dead Armenians was safer than dealing with those who were under attack. In the midst of the Karabagh war, the leadership of the Society for Armenian Studies (SAS), an affiliate of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), reached out to MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF MENA) asking it to issue a statement condemning the attack on cultural rights, the murder of scholars, and the obstruction of education.¹¹ However, CAF MENA was reluctant to take any steps even when clear evidence was presented. The reaction was disappointment on the part of hundreds of SAS members. This was happening at the same time that MESA issued a statement condemning the Israeli aggression against Palestinians. Scholars of Middle Eastern studies have failed to see the similarities between Palestinians and the Armenians of Karabagh despite their analogous historical trajectories in the fight for the right to self-determination.

The ambivalence of MESA's leadership is testimony to a larger problem: the positioning of Armenians in Middle Eastern studies and beyond. There still seems to be widespread ignorance of and indifference to all things Armenian. To understand this, we need to go back to the first decades of MESA, when Armenians were not even a footnote in the pages of Middle East history. For example, in the first decades of its inception MESA failed to address and condemn the campaign of denial of the Armenian Genocide launched by consecutive Turkish governments in the US academic sphere. This was a well-orchestrated campaign

⁹ Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh, “The Armenian Cultural Heritage in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Cases of Vandalism and at Risk of Destruction by Azerbaijan,” Ad Hoc Public Report, Stepanakert, 26 January 2021, <https://artsakhombuds.am/hy/document/792>.

¹⁰ Hovannes Nazaretyan, “The Armenian Monuments are Targets for the Azerbaijani Soldiers,” (in Armenian), *Fact Investigation Platform*, 25 January 2021, <https://fip.am/14568>.

¹¹ On the correspondence between SAS and MESA, regarding the latter's stance, see: Correspondence between the Society for Armenian Studies and the Middle East Studies Association, 24 May 2021, 8 June 2021, and 23 June 2021, <https://societyforarmenianstudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SAS-MESA-ARTSAKH.pdf>.

in which many prominent Middle Eastern and Ottoman/Turkish studies scholars took an active role. For example, on May 19, 1985, sixty-nine prominent scholars of Turkish, Ottoman, and Middle Eastern studies published an open letter in which they protested US House Joint Resolution 192 that designated April 24, 1986 as a “National Day of Remembrance of Man’s Inhumanity to Man” (especially for remembering the Armenian Genocide by the government of the Ottoman Turkish Empire). They argued that a phrase in the resolution that said “the one and one half million people of Armenian ancestry who were victims of genocide perpetrated in Turkey between 1915 and 1923” was misleading or inaccurate.¹² The letter continued to deny that a genocide had ever taken place in the Ottoman Empire and denied that modern day Turkey had anything to do with it. But denialists of the Armenian Genocide are not part of the past, they are still very active in contemporary academic circles. In addition to being preoccupied with their futile efforts at the dissemination of (mis)knowledge about the Armenian Genocide, they also are currently embarking on new projects to write a revisionist history that denies the historical ties of Armenians to the land of Karabagh and undermines their quest for self-determination.¹³

However, despite the continuing presence of denialists within the field of Middle Eastern, Turkish, and Ottoman studies, in the past two decades there also have been positive steps toward reckoning with the past, specifically among a younger generation of scholars. Moreover, new waves of scholars are now interested in broader topics, like the political and socioeconomic aspects of Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire.

It is important to note here that this marginalization is endemic to not only Armenians, but encompasses other groups such as Copts, Assyrians, Maronites, and Chaldeans, among others. It is time to start an honest and productive discussion about the position of these minorities in the larger context of the field. Armenians as well as other minority groups and their historical experiences in the region should not be viewed outside the prism of Middle Eastern studies. On the contrary, all of these minorities possess a very rich and complex history. They are part and parcel of the political and socioeconomic transformations that shaped the late 19th and the 20th centuries. Their diverse, untapped sources provide an important medium for understanding the history of the region in all its complexities.

¹² “Attention Members of the U.S. House of Representatives,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1985.

¹³ M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael M. Gunter, eds., *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022).