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Nalbantian, T.

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Book Review

Nicola Migliorino. *(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.

Reviewed by Tsolin Nalbantian

(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria by Nicola Migliorino is a fresh and exciting addition to the study of Lebanon and Syria and the first of its kind in its dedication to the history and development of the Armenian communities in both countries. It contributes to various disciplines and fields of study while engaging in an analysis of the presence of Armenians in Lebanon and Syria, making it a useful and pertinent tool not only for those specifically interested in Armenians, Lebanon, and/or Syria, but also for scholars of political science, history, anthropology, and refugee, migration, and diaspora studies.

What initially interests Migliorino is the unique positioning of the Armenian communities in both Lebanon and Syria and their engagement with the state. Their status, oscillating between behaving as a minority, yet not being strictly excluded from the majority, pushes Migliorino to broaden his analysis to consider the Armenian community as more than just an exception to the commonly assumed “choice” available to minorities of assimilation or exclusion. Are the Armenians of Lebanon and Syria an example of how a minority ethno-cultural group can find a place within the contemporary Middle East?

Migliorino studies the extent of this “exceptional cultural diversity” from three perspectives. The first is a refugee story, which includes the circumstances of how the Armenian communities were formed in the 20th century. How this refugee community then struggled to find a space as, “a distinct cultural community in the Arab East” is the second. This perspective enables Migliorino to discuss the “range of different dimensions and different meanings of the presence of the Armenians in the Levant” and leads to the incorporation of theories of “diasporic transnationalism” in his work. Coupled with socio-political analysis of and between two Middle Eastern states, Migliorino is better able to justify the necessity of his compound comparative study.

Migliorino’s third approach is an acknowledgment of previous scholarly work and its limitations. He rightly critiques ethno-politics and ethno-conflict theory, which employ a state-centered perspective that either views minorities as threats to its territorial integrity and legitimacy, or as opportunities that can be used to mobilize and control key sectors of the population. The ethno-political approach also fails to consider minorities as alternative ways of being Lebanese or Syrian in addition to ignoring how they may (or may not) organize their relations with the state and society.

These themes and methods provide the foundations for the organization of the work. Chapter 1 is a brief overview on the origins of the Armenian people and the historical circumstances that led to the establishment of the communities in Syria and Lebanon. Chapter 2, limited to the Mandate Period, traces the metamorphoses of Armenian institutions from the Armenian *millet* to Syria and Lebanon and is critical to Migliorino’s principle argument of the (re)construction of Armenia. Chapter 3 presents an interesting and uncommon opportunity to look at Armenian community involvement from independence to 1967. The last two chapters examine the positioning of the Armenian communities during the uncertain years of the Lebanese civil war and the consolidation of Hafiz al-Asad’s governance in Syria through late 2005, after the assassination of former prime-minister Rafiq al-Hariri in Lebanon and through the continuance of the Asad regime in Syria.

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All five chapters, to varying degrees, accredit the Armenian experience in the Arab East with a constant and tenacious pursuit of a strategy aimed at the preservation of its distinct cultural identity. This trait creates-- and subsequently maintains-- an incontrovertible disparity between the Armenian and Arab and Islamic cultures. The work's consistent assertion that the members of these groups act in "non-assimilatory communal solidarity," or that they exhibit a "commitment and determination to reconstruct Armenia," connected to a communal awareness that the Genocide would have wiped out *their* people, needs to be reconsidered. Such positions suggest both a linear reading of history and a construction of a monolithic Armenian world in perennial opposition to another. What are the boundaries of this repeatedly used construct, "Armenian"? Without such a discussion the work encourages an image of a minority in perpetual opposition to an (Arab) majority. And while Migliorino does caution that his treatment of Armenians and their experience is "notwithstanding internal divisions and differences," such an addendum falls far short of the lengthy study necessary that could be then used to explore *traits* of the Armenian experience. It is frustrating that Migliorino does not thoroughly delve into the intricacies and complexities within, among, and between the communities in both countries. Can the study of the evolution of the Armenian communities and the exploration of their apparent success within a state searching for legitimacy be possible without their homogenization?

Another diversion is the lack of a proper investigation of the meaning of Armenia-- especially with regard to its apparent "(re)construction." From the work's title, the reader expects an argument that (the) Armenia is (re)constructed in both locations. Is reconstruction a reproduction? What is meant by the so-called original? Migliorino does trace the formation of Armenian consciousness to the first part of the nineteenth century when a small group of elite Armenians, sons of rich *amiras*, and a few students supported by philanthropists studied abroad in Italy and France. However, the effect of this elite's European education on the population of Anatolia-- which was overwhelmingly made up of peasants-- is unclear at best, as is the relationship between "Armenian consciousness" and "Armenia." Did those residents of Anatolia, who comprised the bulk of the survivors who later found themselves in Syria and Lebanon, identify as Armenians, and as members of an Armenian nation? Did they perceive themselves as living in (the) Armenia? Or did they only later, as survivors, imagine themselves as having done so? Migliorino neglects, first, to identify such a consciousness as almost, if not entirely, elite and male dominated; second, to cite the connection of the European educational system to European colonialism and colonization; and third, to explore the impact of the exile or death of this group's members during the genocide upon the formation of a national consciousness. Who is defining the boundary and locus of the nation and national consciousness and when and where is this taking place?

Nevertheless, these shortcomings should not distract the reader from the overall great significance of the work, namely the powerful corollary of this distinct cultural identity: it is "part of an incidental by-product of the precarious ethno-political arrangements that make up for the state's legitimacy gap." Migliorino's analysis demonstrates that Syria and Lebanon could not view distinct cultural identities more dissimilarly-- Syria denies their relevance and Lebanon adheres to a consociational arrangement-- but yet both use the Armenian presence to buttress the structure of the state. Any subsequent work on Syria and Lebanon must therefore address Migliorino's discussions on the sustainability of these arrangements. This is one of the major successes of the book: it forces the consideration of ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in any discussion on the Lebanese and Syrian states.

Lastly, it would be interesting to read how Migliorino would incorporate recent political developments into the narrative of Lebanon and the role and effectiveness of the Armenian leadership and political parties. Migliorino does mention the successful political alliance of the Dashnak party with Michel 'Aoun, but given the climate at the time of his research, the likelihood of changing political conditions as a result of the political prowess of the Armenians is unthinkable. Nevertheless, the new political order of Lebanon since

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2006 does complicate Migliorino's maintenance of the community's political weakness.

The clear distinction maintained between the experiences, histories, and societal developments in both countries makes evident Migliorino's desire not to conflate the visibility of Armenians in Syria and Lebanon and presents the work as more than another study on the survival of the Armenian nation. *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria* is instead a unique example of a study that explores the effects of the merger of a minority with a state's search for legitimacy. That the work has the potential to demand a re-reading and re-examination of works on Syria and Lebanon is a welcome and impressive contribution to various disciplines and fields of study.

Tsolin Nalbantian is currently a PhD Candidate in Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures Department at Columbia University. She specializes in the development of the Armenian community in Lebanon, and its interactions with the surrounding Lebanese-Arab population and its roles played within the construction of a Lebanese-Arab identity.

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