

ROUNDTABLE

## Fault Lines and Fractures in the 2020 Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh War: Silence, Absence, and Erasure in Middle East Studies

Edited by Bedross Der Matossian and Sossie Kasbarian 

### Introduction

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These essays grew out of a roundtable discussion at the 2021 MESA (Middle East Studies Association) Annual Meeting sponsored by the Society for Armenian Studies, entitled “Fault Lines and Fractures in the 2020 Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh War,” which addressed the representation of the Fall 2020 war and the failure of scholars within Middle East studies to engage with it. This introduction offers a short background to the roundtable, and a brief conceptual and discursive framework for the essays that follow.

The six-week war resulted in over five thousand dead and tens of thousands of Armenians displaced: a resounding victory for Azerbaijan, and the Armenian state on the verge of implosion. Scholars of Armenian studies (broadly defined) were galvanized, engaged in analysis, constructing discourse and representing the voices of Armenians, which were reduced, flattened, or absent from mainstream analyses. This was mostly met by silence from their colleagues within Middle East studies. Our MESA roundtable sought to explore why this was so, and to untangle epistemological hierarchies as well as hegemonic lenses through which the field is approached. In the months between the online roundtable and the completion of these essays, we have been mulling over questions posed by Boris Adjemian and Vazken Davidian, writing at the time of the war: “How can scholarship make sense when, all of a sudden, concepts seem empty, historicization and critical deconstruction derisory and incongruous, contextualisation meaningless? Do professional solidarities between scholars still mean something when existential fears come up against indifference? How do we respond to the silence of non-involved academics that resembles the cynical *laissez-faire* and fake neutrality of dominant powers and international organisations? Is there a future for a de-essentialized and de-nationalised scholarship in an area and a field that can become so easily overwhelmed by nationalisms and essentialisms?”<sup>1</sup>

Using the 2020 war as a prism and springboard, we felt strongly that we wanted to open up and develop this discussion. To do so, we reached out to colleagues to help widen this conversation around connected themes of silence, marginalization, erasure, gaps, liminality and knowledge production within Middle East studies, and the limits of solidarity. We were

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Adjemian and Vazken Khatchig Davidian, “Scholarship and Introspection in the Time of War,” *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 13 (2021): 255–57, <https://doi.org/10.4000/eac.2743>.

especially keen to engage with comparative experiences, and invited colleagues working in the wider field to join the project. Of these, our colleagues in Assyrian studies and Coptic studies responded positively and have enriched and broadened this discussion significantly.

The war of 2020 and its multilayered violence caused many scholars of Armenian background or Armenian studies to question their place in Middle East studies and in the academy. Many retreated into safe spaces and bubbles to process the silence and indifference from their colleagues. This roundtable, founded and developed in that site of refuge, seeks to speak to that silence. This collection of essays retains the polyphonous spirit of the original MESA panel, reflecting a multidisciplinary that pushes each of us to think beyond our own approaches and frameworks. Bringing together twelve historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and an art historian has encouraged a nuanced and textured discussion. We invite others to join us in pushing the boundaries of these conversations as an epistemic and political intervention that is deeply inclusive and humane, and depends upon our collective participation. We draw from the spirit of Jill Stauffer's work on "ethical loneliness": "If stories lack support, they may begin to seem unreal, even to those who lived them. Human life, even in its privacy, relies on a cooperatively authored world. . . . Even my capacity to own my intellectual solitude relies on my ability to trust that I am part of a world and that I can expect just treatment and help when I need it: it is already a form of sociality."<sup>2</sup>

### Disrupting Borders and Bounded Area Studies

Within Middle East studies, Armenians have historically been absent, or mentioned only in passing. Studies were often framed around the premise that they were foreign to the region and therefore treated with suspicion, caution, or exoticism; alternatively they were absorbed within broader subjects like Christians or minorities of the region. Despite strides in grounding Armenians within Middle East studies, this narrative persists. This is underpinned by a political undercurrent that depicts Armenians as outsiders: even in rooted communities like Lebanon where the Armenians are part of the state fabric,<sup>3</sup> in recent years there has been a normalization of anti-Armenian hate speech permeating the public sphere, and anti-Armenian demonstrations orchestrated or mobilized by Turkey extending its power base among allies and sympathizers of the AKP.<sup>4</sup> The current wave of anti-Armenian feeling has been on display at least since the centenary commemorations of the genocide, with certain Islamist leaders unironically denying the genocide as they call for its completion, in solidarity with Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

This theme also proliferates on social media, particularly around 24 April, the date when the genocide is commemorated annually.<sup>6</sup> On a regular basis, on their home turf, Lebanese Armenians are reminded of their vulnerability. This precarity is not confined to "the region" but extends to organized transnational activities by migrant groups. During the 2020 war, Azerbaijani and Turkish thugs in France and Germany took to the streets hunting for Armenians.<sup>7</sup> These realities suggest that despite significant scholarship, entrenched

<sup>2</sup> Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Tsolin Nalbantian, *Armenians beyond Diaspora: Making Lebanon Their Own* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Sossie Kasbarian, "The Armenian Middle East: Boundaries, Pathways and Horizons," in *The Routledge Handbook on Middle Eastern Diasporas*, ed. Dalia Abdelhady and Ramy Aly (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Sossie Kasbarian, "The Politics of Memory and Commemoration: Armenian Diasporic Reflections on 2015," *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 1 (2018): 123–43.

<sup>6</sup> Yeghia Tashjian, "The Neo-Ottomans Are Back: How Should Lebanese Armenians Respond?" *Armenian Weekly*, 24 June 2020, <https://armenianweekly.com/2020/06/24/the-neo-ottomans-are-back-how-should-lebanese-armenians-respond>.

<sup>7</sup> Clea Skopeliti, "Video Shows Turkish and Azeri Nationals 'Looking for Armenians' in France," *Independent.co.uk*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turks-azeris-lyon-france-armenians-vienne->

narratives in Middle East studies, combined with new or rebranded political forces, permit only a precarious and insecure space for Armenians, as a liminal, intersectional, diasporic people. Their historical presence and rootedness in the region continues to be questioned and undermined by state and non-state actors. This dehumanizing mix of “epistemic” (Donabed) and everyday banal violence strips Armenians of the basic dignity of having a safe place in the world. The 2020 war revealed that this precarity extends to their place in the academy, where their spaces and right to speak, be heard, and listened to are by no means secure.

The groups studied in this collection compel us to challenge dominant approaches, narratives, and epistemologies by engaging with the historical legacies and ongoing impact they have on those they marginalize (Lukasik, Donabed, and Davidian). The success of state nationalism has reduced Armenians, Assyrians, Maronites, Copts, and others to “minorities” and hence Others (Rowe, Travis, Nalbantian, Donabed, and Lukasik), subjected to the disciplining power of the state. Indeed, the experience of “minorities” in the region suggests that they are sites of contention and crises, and that current approaches are ill-equipped or not inclined to engage with them because they do not align with political interests and academic trends (Rowe, Travis, Lukasik, Der Matossian, Donabed, and Davidian). The academy categorizes these groups as minorities and others precisely because they challenge and problematize the imagined and spatial borders of the nation. This framing at best reduces these groups to ornamental others; at worst, it misinterprets, misrepresents, silences, and erases them. This framing also diminishes scholarship on the region: by failing to actively and consciously seek out the nuances and complexities of the lived experiences of those deemed to be on the peripheries and margins, and to produce work that engages with the structural powers that label them as such, we remain entrenched in scholarship that reflects the strongholds of power and dominance. When we focus on the “marginal” as marginal, the “center” remains intact. The ultimate aim here is not the production of counter-narratives but rather redefining the contours of the nation, the state, and the region from a more critical position.

Although recent studies have examined these groups on their own terms and from their position, this approach has not really been integrated into mainstream frameworks and methodologies (Der Matossian). This lack of integration then “reinforces a sense of marginality in its scholarship” (Nalbantian). Approaches that reflect hegemonic regimes of states and scholarship fail to critically engage with these groups’ complexities, and therefore continue to subjugate them to being read and reduced (or erased) through the lens of state nationalisms (Nalbantian, Davidian, Goshgarian, and Donabed).

This extends to area studies where scholarship rarely takes seriously the connectivities and continuities between regions. Several of the contributors (Der Matossian, Laycock, Oskanian, and Shirinian) ask us to reconsider bounded “area studies.” Regional (and academic) boundaries tend to reify regions, flatten the complexities contained within, and establish hierarchies of worth. They often ignore the peoples at the peripheries of these “areas” who do not quite fit in, considered either too complicated or inconsequential. Jo Laycock asks us to reposition our frameworks and focus on migrant experiences, which would “create space for a more nuanced account of the historical experiences of the mobile, intermingled populations and overlapping attachments to territory that have characterized the South Caucasus” (and certainly the Middle East).

As transnational groups, the Armenians, Assyrians, and Copts transgress metaphoric and spatial boundaries and act as sites for critiquing reigning assumptions about the nation-state and the region, both in study and as lived experience (Laycock, Rowe, Shirinian, and Lukasik). Candace Lukasik elucidates how conceptual and political orientations and positionings in diaspora “translate” back home, and vice versa, arguing that “Coptic entanglements in

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[video-b1422175.html?fbclid=IwAR3TrXXSLzRthVjymGVGPByPWrcnR9peCtA6zPwOSx8RQOmNLgfoOullR4iM](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743822000733). These episodes were not covered by any Middle East media outlets.

the minority concept, as it exists in the US religiopolitical terrain as well as academia, not only suture Copts to liminal spaces of minor knowledge production but also shape the possibilities of alternative forms of solidarity in diaspora contexts and bind imaginaries of liberation that flow in and out of Egypt.”

### Silences Past, Present, and Continuous

One of the defining characteristics of the 2020 war was the silence from the academic community, a theme that many contributors tackle. This included the MESA community, which, as described here by Bedross Der Matossian and Tsolin Nalbantian, responded to the Society for Armenian Studies in a manner that implied some deep-seated problematic attitudes, along the lines of: “Armenians = genocide, and once that is ticked off, we’re done, let’s move on.” This idea reduces the Armenian experience to the genocide and Armenians’ presence in Middle East studies as primarily situated in late Ottoman history as victims. By confining Armenians to this space, as (now) recognized victims of historic genocide,<sup>8</sup> there is limited engagement with living Armenians and limited space for their voices, experiences, or agency. It would seem that minorities are tolerated within the Middle East (studies) community as long as they stick to certain scripts and tropes as set by gatekeepers (for Armenians: victims of genocide, docile minorities of Arab states, exotic rem(a)inders of a more cosmopolitan past, beleaguered remnant communities in Turkey) who can only be viewed within these categories. This boxing in of Armenians and others prevents their integration into mainstream scholarship and keeps them outsiders and interlopers, and potentially disruptive subjects.

Nalbantian interrogates the connection between recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Middle East studies community and the silence that the 2020 war was met with: “What is recognition if it still allows for injustice to be ignored or debated? Despite recognition, ongoing violence and ethnic cleansing of Armenians in regions just adjacent to the field, in the southern Caucasus, continue to be ignored.” This suggests an essential precarity that this “recognition” is founded on, that mirrors and reinforces the Armenian situation in the field as a whole, and applies to Assyrians, Copts, and others. Simply ticking the box of “recognizing” the Ottoman genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks does not weave these histories into the tapestry. Without sincere rigorous engagement to its continuing and multidimensional legacies, it remains a tangential and separate thread.

At its most basic, the Artsakh/Nagorno Karabagh conflict was framed as a conflict of two principles: one of self-determination (of ethnic Armenians) vs. the legitimacy of state borders (Azerbaijan). Armenians were fighting for their right to rule themselves, to have agency and control over their own futures. Postcolonial state borders are always problematic (Der Matossian) and often unreflective of the people on the ground (Laycock). By resisting the might of the Azerbaijani state (and their ally Turkey), the Armenians as resisters, often teenage conscripts, was not a trope that the academy recognized or wanted to engage with.

One of the aims of this roundtable is to record the 2020 war and confront the silence that leads to “forgetting.” Silence breeds ignorance and moral indifference, and normalizes violence against those who have been rendered unworthy through decades of marginalization of one form or another. Rachel Goshgarian draws a clear thread between the “long history of the Armenians and its erasure (or the ignorance thereof)” and this recent silence. As the genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks was “forgotten” by both perpetrators and bystanders and continues to be denied by the projects and campaigns of the Turkish state

<sup>8</sup> This is by no means universally accepted by the Middle East studies academy. Denialism persists in pockets and is fueled and funded by the Turkish state. For a recent study, see Marc David Baer, *Sultanic Saviors and Tolerant Turks: Writing Ottoman Jewish History, Denying the Armenian Genocide* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020).

and its allies, it is a moral and epistemic duty to record and contextualize continuing episodes of violence.

Stanley Cohen talks about how “historical memories about suffering in distant places are even more prone to speedy and thorough deletion through the ‘politics of ethnic amnesia.’ Atrocities were denied at the time by the perpetrator government; the information flow is limited; there are either no geopolitical interests, or they are too strong to be sacrificed; victims are unimportant, isolated peoples in remote parts of the world. Some people make more suitable and memorable victims than others.”<sup>9</sup> The link between historical amnesia of past periods of violence and ignoring present day ones is obvious. This is especially the case when the violence concerns those who do not possess power and are not of economic or political interest, or lack “symbolic capital” (Oskanian). Combatting silence therefore is also an attempt to restore some humanity to the dehumanized. In contrast to other contemporary cases, the many thousands of dead, displaced, and injured, and the ripples of families and communities blighted, have received negligible attention from the rest of the world.

### Scholarship, Solidarity, and Decolonization

The silences around the 2020 war prompted many of the contributors to think about solidarity. Tamar Shirinian considers “the critical necessity for internationalism and solidarity” which may “orient us to the region by way of connections to the various peoples of that region with a political and ideological commitment to the well-being of all peoples there and everywhere.” Although many such intersectional bonds of solidarity and activism exist and are built on decades of commitment and endeavor, the war revealed their limitations. For those, including authors in this roundtable, who have been involved in academic-activist communities built around some kind of (imagined) *communitas*, the private and public silence of colleagues was unexpected and disappointing.

For solidarity to be meaningful, it requires a sustained degree of self-reflexivity, an unpacking of one’s positionality, a sincere desire to listen to others, and engage with their narratives and experiences from an informed position. Solidarity requires the redressing of power differentials as far as imaginable, so that it is conceivable to speak and listen on a more equal footing.<sup>10</sup> This creates the space for disrupting hegemonic tropes and discourses and for the formation of transnational networks of activism and solidarity that are substantive. It is through radical honesty and ethical commitment that such projects can produce genuine solidarity that can both speak to power and act with moral authority.<sup>11</sup> This calls for us as scholars, for example, to use our voices and positions to challenge the cosy relationships between our own “Western” “liberal” universities, institutions, and governments, and repressive authoritarian states whose regimes depend on human rights

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 12.

<sup>10</sup> I am inspired by Linda Tabar’s radical exposition of solidarity in development where “solidarity means creatively disrupting and moving beyond dominant mainstream development approaches and interventions while sharing the risks of the struggle”; “Disrupting Development, Reclaiming Solidarity: The Anti-Politics of Humanitarianism,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 45, no. 4 (2016): 16–31.

<sup>11</sup> Examples of this kind of solidarity include the keynote speech given by Cornel West at the conference Nagorno Karabakh/Artsakh and the Palimpsests of Conflict, Violence, and Memory, a one-day international conference organized by Sebouh Aslanian, UCLA Richard Hovannisian Endowed Chair in Modern Armenian History; the UCLA Promise Institute for Human Rights; the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy; the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies; the Society for Armenian Studies; and the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (“Nagorno Karabakh/Artsakh and the Palimpsests of Conflict, Violence, and Memory,” Promise Armenian Institute, 31 October 2020, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/armenia/event/14629>). Another good example is the open letter “A Call for Lasting Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh,” published on 16 October 2020 in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, signed by Cornel West and other prominent public intellectuals, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/lasting-peace-nagorno-karabakh> (discussed by Goshgarian).

abuse.<sup>12</sup> It requires us to question the historic and new entanglements that make our institutions complicit in the whitewashing of past and present crimes and normalizing of war, dispossession, and erasure.

Underlying this roundtable is a call to engage with the decolonization project and see this engagement as a demanding and continuous one (Davidian). Thorough, deep decolonization requires us to challenge and reimagine the historic frameworks of imperialism and subjugation that persist into the present day, in different forms and manifestations.<sup>13</sup> These essays suggest that there is a continuous thread in the marginalization of “others” in Middle East studies, where dominant narratives, historical and contemporary, work together to produce, reproduce, and reinforce hierarchies that belittle, overlook, or delegitimize the lives of those that do not “fit.” Decolonizing Middle East studies means addressing both the vestiges of historical imperialism and the new sites and modes of imperialism. The familiar imperialists have been joined by new imperial powers, ones that have mostly escaped examination on those terms because their reach extends well beyond the academy, and because they posture as anti-Western imperialists when it suits them. At a time of global crises and disorder, it is essential that we challenge the power-money-knowledge production nexus. Failing to do so results in a selectivity that continues to marginalize and erase those who lack resources, military might, or political clout.

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<sup>12</sup> As I write, the EU has struck a gas deal with Azerbaijan, hailing it a “reliable, trustworthy partner,” a move only criticized by human rights groups (Jennifer Rankin, “Human Rights Groups Criticise EU’s Azerbaijan Gas Deal,” *Guardian*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/19/human-rights-groups-criticise-eu-azerbaijan-gas-deal>).

<sup>13</sup> For an exposition of this vision, see Lerna Ekmekçiöğlü, “Of Dark Pasts and Pipe Dreams: The Turkish University,” *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 3 (2021): 185–93.

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