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ARMENIAN REFUGEES IN ALEPPO:
HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS
AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES: 1915-1930

VICTORIA ROWE

This article is an overview study of the international humanitarian response to the refugee crisis between 1915 and 1930 when Syria, and particularly the city of Aleppo, became home to tens of thousands of Armenian refugee survivors forcibly deported during the genocidal program implemented and carried out against the Ottoman Armenians by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government in Constantinople. The objective of this article is threefold: the first is to determine the policies of the various governments of Syria between 1915 and 1930 towards the Armenian refugee population; the second is to examine the humanitarian efforts of international bodies, such as the League of Nations, the International Red Cross and the Near East Relief Society, to provide assistance to refugees; and the third is to identify the strategies refugees employed to ensure survival and to try to rebuild familial and communal ties. In order to assess the policies and practices of governments and international bodies as well as the survival strategies devised by refugees the article examines the flow of refugees into Syrian territory, the types of humanitarian aid available, and the political and economic conditions within Syria which were significant factors in policy-making and in providing the context in which refugees shaped their lives. Reports by officials from foreign governments and eyewitnesses working and living in Aleppo, published accounts by humanitarian workers, the records and reports on the relief activities sponsored by the League of Nations as well as refugee testimony provide invaluable information on one of the first international humanitarian efforts to address an early twentieth-century refugee

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crisis and constitute the basis of this article. Peter Balakian (2003) has written on the mobilization of American aid to assist Armenian refugees, while this article, although it does discuss the activities of the American Near East Relief Society, concentrates on European efforts and the involvement of the League of Nations to respond to the Armenian refugee crisis following World War I. In their seminal work, *Survivors: an oral history of the Armenian Genocide*, Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller (1993) have pioneered the study of oral accounts of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, and this article has also drawn upon their example, not to discuss the circumstances of the Armenian Genocide, but in order to read survivor testimony as a valuable source for uncovering the narratives of genocide survivors as refugees. Although not all genocide survivor accounts include information on the survivor's experience of being a refugee, many do and it is these accounts that I have used in order to bring out the story of the lived experience of refugees. Refugee accounts add to the official documents written by policy-makers and officials as they tell us what it felt like for an Armenian to live in Aleppo in 1918 and what refugees did in order to survive in that city. Current policies by a body such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees emphasize refugee input into their own communal reconstruction and this emphasis on refugee experience and agency has also influenced the focus and questions asked in this article (Sørensen 1998:v-ix).

**Timeline of Armenian Refugee Flow into Syria: 1915 to 1930**

A continuous stream of tens of thousands of Armenian refugees entered Syrian territory between 1915 and 1930; however, within this influx of incoming refugees it is possible to identify peak periods of migration. It is necessary to identify these peak periods as each wave elicited different political and humanitarian responses and policies as well as bringing with it unique challenges to survival. The first wave of Armenian displacement occurred in 1915 when caravans of deported Armenians, those who had survived the death marches, were herded into camps near Aleppo by the Ottoman authorities. The fortunate among them were sent on to towns in the south where some were able to stay in Damascus or go on to Jerusalem; however, the majority were sent southeast from Aleppo and the railway line to the Syrian Desert where without provisions to sustain life most succumbed to starvation,
dehydration and disease (Kaiser 2002:13). A minority of those sent to the Desert were absorbed into Arab villages and nomadic tribes. Many refugee accounts as well as the records of the League of Nations attest to the absorption of Armenian refugees into Arab households as servants, adopted children, or wives. The experiences of the refugees in these households differed depending on individual circumstances. Some refugees were well treated as family members while others were ill-treated and subject to psychological, physical and sexual abuse (N.A. Admission Files to Karen Jeppe’s Reception House 1922). Beginning in 1915, the United States consul, Jesse A. Jackson, and the German consul, Walter Rössler, stationed in Aleppo, reported to their respective governments the arrival of large numbers of displaced Armenians and complained that the Ottoman authorities were carrying out a deliberate policy of preventing aid to the deportees and forcing them away from Aleppo. According to historian Hilmar Kaiser, in his account of humanitarian efforts in Aleppo between 1915 and 1916, Rössler wrote German embassy officials requesting intervention with the Ottoman authorities to allow Armenians to remain in the city or go to surrounding areas if they so chose (Kaiser 2002:14-17). Despite diplomatic appeals, however, the deportation of Ottoman Armenians into Syrian territory continued from 1915 to 1918.

The second influx of refugees, particularly into the city of Aleppo, occurred in 1918 at the end of the Great War and the entry into Syria of the British army. This group of refugees was largely composed of Armenians who flooded out of the hinterland surrounding Aleppo to begin to search for lost family members and to try to rebuild shattered lives. Multiple refugee accounts confirm that throughout the region Aleppo was the centre to which refugees flocked to try to find information or locate lost relatives (Chitjian 2003:267; Dadrian 2003:326).

The third large influx of refugees occurred between 1922 and 1923 as a result of the advancement of the Turkish army and the policies of the Turkish nationalist government towards the remaining Armenian population within their territory. In an agreement signed by France and Turkey on 21 October 1921 the former recognized Cilicia as part of Turkish territory in exchange for economic privileges in the country (Lust-Okar 1996:56). After the French handover of Cilicia, a region with a large, well-established Armenian population, Armenians fled for safety to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine (Barton 1930:147-8). In
1922 15,000 Armenian refugees entered Aleppo, and the following year another 20,000 arrived in the country (Lust-Okar 1996:56). The resulting influx caused Karen Jeppe, a Danish humanitarian worker who had arrived in Aleppo in 1921 to take up refugee relief there, to report to the League of Nations on 24 August 1922 that prior to the agreement conditions in Aleppo were difficult for the refugee and the non-refugee population alike as housing shortages, the steep food prices and high unemployment, due to the weak global economy, impinged upon everyone. Jeppe further asserted that she could have managed even these hardships but for the French withdrawal from Cilicia which led to a huge influx of refugees. She estimated that Syria, despite being a poor country, took in the vast majority of these refugees and commented that although the local population was “patient” the situation was hard because the refugees typically were destitute and unable to find employment (Jeppe 1922). This issue of relations between the native and refugee populations was a concern to humanitarian bodies as well as various governments and will be discussed in greater detail subsequently.

In addition to the handover of Cilicia in 1922, Armenians residing in Turkey, many of whom had returned to their homelands at the end of the Great War, began to leave the country again in large numbers in 1923 after their property and goods were confiscated by the authorities. According to Levon Marashlian at the time when guarantees for minority protection were being discussed at the peace conference in Lausanne the pace of property confiscation and forced exodus of Armenians and Greeks from Turkey increased when the Nationalist government demanded that foreign banks furnish lists of the goods and securities deposited by Greeks and Armenians in order to use this information to confiscate those same assets (Marashlian 1999:136). The Grand National Assembly in Ankara had already reinstated a law on 22 April 1922, which had been passed in May 1915, allowing the state to confiscate property left by Armenians forcibly deported despite the fact that the 1915 law had been declared null and void in Article 144 of the Treaty of Sèvres signed on 10 August 1920 (Marashlian 1999:119). The British consul in Aleppo advised the British Foreign Office that Armenians arriving in that city were reporting not being allowed to sell their property as the government had confiscated it, as well as being subject to attacks and robbery by thieves as they headed to the Syrian border (Cited in Marashlian 1999:136-137). Accounts by
refugees confirm official reports that Armenians in this period were not allowed to sell their property as it was subject to confiscation. Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, for example, describes how in 1923 posters appeared in the city of Konia proclaiming that all Armenians must renounce Turkish citizenship and leave the country. She recounts that Armenian property, including houses and furniture, was expropriated without payment to be converted into schools, army barracks and hospitals (Highgas 1985:123). Seizures of property and goods meant that refugees arrived in Syria with little money and thus put further pressure on the already burdened local economy.

A fourth influx of refugee migration occurred in 1925 following conflict between the Kurdish population and the Turkish state. Because many Armenian women and children had been taken into Kurdish households, and in some cases married into Kurdish families, in the context of the Armenian Genocide, the conflict affected Armenians too and some of these women and children left Kurdish families in order to join the Armenian community in Aleppo. In some situations Kurds entered Syrian territory as part of nomadic migrations and this enabled aid workers to make contact with Armenians who were living among them. For example, in the Report of the Commission for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East (1 July 1 1925 to 30 June 1926), an official League publication dated 10 August 1926, Karen Jeppe recounted the activity for the year and confirmed that Kurdish tribes had passed into Syrian territory in the winter months and that Commission workers had advised Armenians among them, whenever possible, of the opportunity to re-enter the Armenian community if they so desired. The emphasis on choice was a crucial element in Jeppe’s work with refugees as she did not believe that Armenians should be coerced into rejoining the Armenian community. She considered it her goal to appraise all Armenians within Syrian territory of the opportunity to join the community, but accepted the fact that some would not choose to do so, particularly women who had children with Kurdish or Arab husbands (Jeppe 1926:2).

The fifth significant wave of refugee influx occurred between 1929 and 1930. Karen Jeppe reported that this particular exodus of Armenian refugees consisted in many cases of families but also included a significant proportion of women who needed “special protection” because they were entirely alone and unable to rely on family assistance (Jeppe 1930). These refugees, who arrived at the
Syrian border without passports, reported being forced to leave villages in Kurdish majority areas and having a tax levied upon them as they left the country. They were initially located in camps in Northern Syria at al-Qamishli and al-Hasakah and in Aleppo (Lust-Okar 1996:56). In a status report on her activities, Karen Jeppe, who ran Reception House, a placement centre for refugees, noted that prior to this influx she had considered closing the doors of Reception House as the numbers of refugees arriving in 1929 had dwindled but in the autumn of that year circumstances changed as more Armenian refugees entered the country from Turkey, causing Jeppe to resolve to keep the centre running (Jeppe 1930). In 1930 she reported having learned from the Armenian Church that there were 40,000 Armenians still residing in Turkey and, therefore, she believed that should more people come to Aleppo Reception House must be open to receive them. Jeppe commented that many of the refugees arriving in 1930 had walked all the way to Aleppo from Turkey and arrived in a condition not very different than the earliest deportation caravans (Jeppe 1930).

These five waves of deportees and refugees constitute the peak influxes of the refugee population into Syrian territory between 1915 and 1930. At this conjuncture, I shall turn to the city of Aleppo as the focal point of refugee migration.

Aleppo as Destination

Beginning in 1915 the city of Aleppo was the principal destination for the Armenian deportee/refugees who had survived the exhausting and dangerous death marches from their hometowns. Many arrived in Aleppo ill, starving and traumatized. In the period from 1915 to 1918 refugees were forced to reside in squalid transit camps, which ringed the outskirts of the city. One of the most notorious of these camps was located in Katma. Descriptions of the camps by refugees, like that provided by Vergeen Kalendarian below, demonstrate why refugees considered it desirable to be able to leave the camps and reach Aleppo:

"The town of Katma was like a huge depository for human debris. Armenians from all over Turkey had been herded into this camp—people with different customs, different dialects, even different outlooks about their plight. Thousands of deportees
were crammed into a small area with unbearable conditions. Mama’s resolute endurance finally failed her, and she became quite sick a few days after we reached Katma.

... Conditions in Katma got increasingly wretched; millions of swarming flies made it impossible to even move from tent to tent. Mothers, unable to nurse their famished babies, gave them rags dipped in sweetened water to suck on, hoping it would keep their infants alive; but the sugary water attracted more flies. Every tent, housing at least two or three critically sick or dying family members, was overrun by the harmful pests.” (Derdarian 1996:51-2)

Consequently, for many refugees to obtain a permit to stay in Aleppo was their goal in order to avoid dying of diseases and hunger in a transit camp or being pushed farther into the Syrian Desert. However, governmental policy from 1915 to 1918 was to move Armenians out of Aleppo (Kaiser 2002:26). Only Armenians who were legal residents of Aleppo prior to 1915 were exempt from this policy and were able to remain in the city. Refugees fortunate enough to have relatives who fit these criteria were sometimes able to remain within extended families. This was the case for Aliza Harb whose grandmother was born in Aleppo and was able to employ her extended family network to obtain permits for her daughter and grandchildren to remain in the city with her (Harb 2003:62). There is additional evidence that government officials unofficially accepted bribes of money or extorted young women and girls in order to hand out permits, which saved some lives. If families were unable to pay or refused to give up female family members, however, they would be refused residence permits. Such was the case of Vergeen Kalendarian and her mother who, after fleeing Katma, were denied permits to stay in Aleppo by the Turkish officer in charge of issuing permits because the mother refused to hand over her daughter to be the officer’s second wife (Derdarian 1996:57-9).

Although refugees sought to stay in Aleppo, because their chances of survival were higher there than in the camps or the desert, conditions in the city during the war were quite harsh. It is well documented that during World War I conscription and famine were rampant in Ottoman Syria and the local Arab population suffered severely under these conditions (Thompson 2000:15). Overcrowding, disease and starvation was exacerbated in the city by the arrival of
refugees made destitute, ill and famished by brutal death marches. By the end of the war there were shortages of everything from food to soap in Aleppo and disease was widespread. Vergeen Kalendarian, who was working in an army hospital as a nurse in 1918, witnessed firsthand the typhus epidemics that swept through the city and observed that the entire population, including military personnel and civilians, felt the effects of the terrible conditions (Derdarian 1996:146). When the second wave of refugee influx occurred in 1918 conditions in the city were still quite bad. Aliza Harb describes desperate starving refugees drinking the blood of slaughtered lambs in the butcher shops (Harb 2003:68). Kalendarian recounts that so many Armenian refugees entered Aleppo that the city’s small Armenian Church could not cope with the numbers needing help in locating relatives and in finding housing and employment. Therefore, in order to provide shelter for the refugees, the Allied army obtained permission from the Syrian government to use unoccupied army barracks as temporary housing for the refugees (Derdarian 1996:213).

After the war not only did refugees face difficult material conditions they were also confronted with devastating psychological realities as most had lost close family members, tens of thousands of children were living in orphanages, and the majority of refugees were unable to return to their hometowns. In her study of Syria during the French Mandate, Elizabeth Thompson notes that prior to the First World War there were very few orphanages in Syria and Lebanon but after the war there twenty orphanages run by private charities and the new government (Thompson 2000:32). Initially, European and American authorities and humanitarian workers expected that the refugees would return to their hometowns and this belief influenced the initial humanitarian aid programmes (Barton 1930:108). However, by the second half of the 1920s the military success of the Turkish nationalist army and its implacable hatred of the Armenians made the return of the refugees impossible. Many of those who had left Aleppo in the hopes of rebuilding lives in their birthplaces returned to Aleppo as soon as possible when faced with renewed persecution. One such refugee was Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas who described the conditions in Aleppo after her return from Konia in 1923 and the sentiments of refugees such as herself towards the Syrian authorities as follows:

"The cost of living was very high in Aleppo. Jobs were scarce. The
streets were thronged with hundreds of refugees looking for work. We were so grateful to the Syrian government for taking us into their territory—at long last, we were free!” (Highgas 1985:145)

For many refugees Aleppo provided their only refuge, a fact acknowledged by humanitarian organizations which sought to facilitate the integration of the refugees into the city as a cornerstone of their refugee settlement programmes.

**Humanitarian Responses to the Refugee Crisis, 1915-1930**

The waves of refugees coming into Syrian territory in the space of fifteen years elicited humanitarian responses from Armenian organizations as well as representatives of the international community, such as the League of Nations, the International Red Cross, the Near East Relief Society, and various Protestant and Roman Catholic missions. Conditions within Syria and the ability of organizations to assist the needy depended on the political circumstances of the country which were quite turbulent as these fifteen years encompassed the Great War and its end; the transition of Syria from an Ottoman province to an Arab kingdom under Emir Faysal from 1918 to 1920; the establishment of the French-administered League of Nations Mandate in 1920; the opposition of the Arab population to French Mandate rule; the proclamation of the state of Greater Lebanon in September 1920; and, finally, the administrative changes enacted by the French authorities in Syria². In addition to population losses caused by the war, Syrians had suffered from severe hunger, in some cases starvation and death due to food shortages and famine between 1915 and 1918 (Thompson 2000:15).

As stated above, relief efforts and policies towards Arabs and the Armenian refugees were contingent on the political circumstances within Syria. The first phase of the humanitarian response occurred during the Great War between 1915 and 1918 and was necessarily limited due to the restrictions imposed by Turkish authorities within Syria. In the summer of 1915 an Armenian Protestant minister,

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² For a discussion of the latter see Khoury 1987:58-9
Reverend Hovhannes Eskijian, who had been the minister of the Emmanuel Church of Aleppo since 1913, worked in co-operation with Father Haroutune Yayian of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the distribution of relief funds to refugees in Aleppo (Kaiser 2002:38). The relief efforts by the Armenian churches were supported by the efforts of the American and German consuls in Aleppo (Kaiser 2002:54). In addition to aid sent to Armenians, the conditions within Syria and Lebanon affecting the local, non-refugee, population also warranted attention. In his important history of the humanitarian operation, *The Story of Near East Relief 1915-1930*, James L. Barton, one of the Near East Relief society’s founders, states that it was the Americans already in Syrian territory, primarily the staff at the American University of Beirut and the members of the Presbyterian Mission, who took the initiative to begin relief by forming an assistance committee in order to aid the non-refugee population and to alert the American public to the conditions in Syria. This group established the Syrian Relief Committee in 1915. However, the Syrian Relief Committee encountered difficulty in distributing aid to the local population because the Turkish commander and governor, Jemal Pasha, forbade foreigners to give food to locals and prohibited the establishment of formal aid structures, asserting that the Ottoman government alone would provide assistance to the needy (Barton 1930:72-73). In order to overcome this obstacle, in the early stages of relief efforts, the Americans utilized Syrian and Armenian networks to distribute aid and food stating that the relief was actually from Syrians in America who were sending help to their compatriots and families. In fact this was not entirely untrue as Syrian immigrants in the United States did send money to help family and friends. Barton reported that the Presbyterian Board transmitted over a million dollars to people within Syria and Lebanon on behalf of these immigrants (Barton 1930:76). As conditions in Syria worsened Jemal Pasha relaxed his orders and allowed the Americans to distribute more aid (Barton 1930:72-3). In November 1915, in order to improve distribution of aid the Syrian, Armenian and Persian relief committees run by Americans merged after agreeing that they shared the common goal of helping distressed people in the same geographic area and would be more effective as a single body (Barton 1930:14).

**Humanitarian Relief Programmes**

Refugee relief efforts evolved throughout the period from 1915 to
1930 to meet the changing needs of the refugee population and in response to the fluctuating conditions within the country. The earliest relief programmes focused on providing food and establishing orphanages to shelter homeless children while additional services such as schools for children and employment schemes for adults were quickly introduced. For instance, Barton writes that from 1915 to 1919 relief efforts by Near East Relief and the Red Cross focused on organizing refugee camps and shelters, trying to halt the spread of disease, providing food to prevent starvation, and helping the fit and able to find work (Barton 1930:77). At the end of the war Near East Relief and the Red Cross followed the British Army into Syria and were able to freely set up soup kitchens and orphanages (Barton 1930:77). The severe food shortages in Aleppo and the resultant diseases necessitated international aid agencies providing relief for both the native and refugee inhabitants of the city (Harb 2003:69). Initially, the distribution system was quite chaotic as the Red Cross attempted to meet the needs of a starving population. In this regard, Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas' description of receiving bread in the initial stages of relief is instructive:

“When I saw the mob of people fighting, nearly killing each other as they waited for a loaf of bread, my first impulse was to turn back, but I thought of the free bread, and slowly walked over to the edge of the crowd and pushed and elbowed myself into the middle of the throng... I just kept pushing, like everyone else, trying to get to the front. We fell on top of each other. We were packed so tight, I think I was standing without my feet on the ground!” ...When the door opened “like a piece of driftwood hurled onto shore by a giant wave, I found myself in a big hall. An American Red Cross worker asked me how many members there were in my family. “Seven,” I said. She gave me five loaves of bread. I slipped the bread into a little sack I had brought with me. I squirmed in and out of the crowd, squashing the bread to my chest with both arms crossed over the sack. I was lucky to get out without someone pulling the bread away from me. I was so proud when I arrived home with the bread!” (Highgas 1985:100)
Very soon, however, the Red Cross established a more orderly system in which each family was issued a card and was instructed to collect bread on a designated day. Highgas commented that the latter system proved much more efficient (Highgas 1985:100).

In addition to food distribution, the Near East Relief and the Red Cross established schools, orphanages and provided employment opportunities for the refugees. Employment programmes enabled refugees to secure housing, food, clothing and education for children as well as giving them a sense of purpose as the following description of the program set up by the Red Cross in 1919 demonstrates:

“The American Red Cross had opened a work project centre for refugees in the same building where bread was issued. My mother and grandmother went to register and were hired immediately. In two weeks’ time, my mother was promoted to the level of “supervisor”, overseeing a group of women who were sewing nurses’ uniforms. This meant more money. The Red Cross organized a section called Junior Work Project Center for young girls in my age group. We did needle lace and “cut work” embroidery.” (Highgas 1985:101)

Highgas commented that she found the job at the Red Cross pleasant as the girls sang and told stories as they worked as well as providing the family with the much needed income. For instance, with their earnings, the three women supported an elderly grandfather, two adult men, and Dirouhi’s young sister (Highgas 1985:101).

In addition to the Near East Relief Society and the Red Cross numerous Armenian organizations worked to ameliorate the living conditions of the refugees. Ties of close cooperation existed between international and Armenian humanitarian organizations, although, as Christopher Walker suggests, it is likely that the Armenian organizations found it necessary to work in cooperation with international organizations because the latter were more easily able to gain “international accreditation” (Walker 1988:47). A typical example of cooperation is evinced when the American Near East Relief collected thousands of Armenian orphans and collaborated with an already established Armenian orphanage run by the Protestant Armenian minister Reverend Cheradjian. Near East Relief asked him to open another facility for 2,500 orphans in 1918 (Derdarian 1996:219). This
orphanage, called Sabon Kan, was soon strained to capacity with not enough beds and bedding, clothing or food, problems which beset most of the city’s relief services. Vergeen describes the unsanitary and dangerous conditions at Sabon Kan as follows: “most of the newly arrived orphans, most of them famished and contagiously ill, slept on cold floors and drank water.” In such conditions Vergeen writes many fell ill and leprosy spread throughout the orphanage infecting the staff and the children (Derdarian 1996:219). By 1923–1924 Near East Relief had shifted a great deal of their operations to the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) which maintained orphanages, supplied medicine and food, and implemented an adoption of orphans program (Walker 1988:47).

In 1921 the Danish humanitarian worker Karen Jeppe arrived in Aleppo in order to aid Armenian refugees there using the skills and organizational and personal networks she had amassed in her days as a worker for the Deutsche Orient-Mission in Urfa where she had worked among the Armenian population from 1903 to 1918. In September 1921 Jeppe officially became a member of the League of Nations’ Commission of Inquiry for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East. In his study on the work of this Commission, historian Vahram L. Shemmassian argues that the Commission was understood to be a purely humanitarian effort and because of this the League of Nations was careful to maintain political neutrality by restricting the Commission’s mandate solely to reconstruct families and reconcile peoples (Shemmassian 2003:85-6). He argues that by not requiring explanation on the circumstances of dislocation and family breakdown the League desired to achieve “credibility, cooperation of the Turkish government, and favourable world public opinion” (Shemmassian 2003:86). The Commission had two centres: one in Constantinople and one in Aleppo. The one in Aleppo was run by Karen Jeppe from 1921 until December 1927 when the League of Nations stopped funding the operation, due largely to financial constraints, although Jeppe ran an independent relief program in Aleppo until her death in 1935. During her years on the Commission, Karen Jeppe interpreted the concept of protection to include establishing a shelter for adult and child refugees, which due to the severe housing shortages in Aleppo consisted of a tent in a refugee camp in the earliest days. Later she rented buildings in the city and there established a soup kitchen, a medical clinic, and employment training workshops—a sewing room for women and for
men carpentry and shoe-making workshops—later she began to implement a policy of establishing villages to employ refugees in the agricultural sector of the Syrian economy (Jeppe 1922).

French Mandate Policies towards the Refugee Population

At the end of the war in 1918 and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, governmental policy towards the Armenians changed when the territory comprising Syria and Lebanon was occupied by the British army and then governed by the Arab government of Emir Faysal from 1918 to 1920. The government of Emir Faysal was too short-lived to be said to have a formal policy towards the Armenian refugee population. Perhaps the most infamous incident in the 1918-1920 period is the massacre of Armenians in Aleppo on February 28, 1919. This massacre occurred as part of a demonstration by nationalists against Syria becoming a French mandate when rioters, some in Arab soldiers’ uniform, attacked Armenian buildings, including an orphanage sponsored by the French government. It has been suggested that one of causes of the massacre of Armenians in Aleppo that day was based on a rumour that Armenians had ill-treated Arab soldiers passing through Cilicia (Russell 1985:77). While the events of a single day should not obscure the fact that generally Armenian refugees were able to freely enter Syrian territory, the massacre does point to the vulnerability of Armenians as refugees and the memory of this massacre may have influenced subsequent humanitarian and governmental policy. For instance, Karen Jeppe was careful to maintain policies that would not lead to what she termed another “Armenian Question” (Jeppe June 17, 1922).

Official, long-term policy towards the Armenian refugee population was implemented under the French Mandate government but its policy towards refugees was not always consistent. It is claimed by Ellen Marie Lust-Okar in an article on Armenian refugees in Syria that the French Mandate authority favoured the Armenian refugee population over the Arab Muslim population because the French viewed the Armenians, as non-Arabs and non-Muslims, as potential allies who would not join Arab nationalist, Pan-Arab or Pan-Islamic movements (Lust-Okar 1996:60). Lust-Okar argues that the French government promoted the Armenians as collaborators by dispensing economic aid through refugee camps and giving Armenians preferential
treatment for employment (Lust-Okar 1996:60-1). However an examination of the interaction between the French authorities and League of Nations sponsored humanitarian work as well as refugee testimonies reveals a more complicated picture of the relationship between the French authorities and the Armenian refugee population than Lust-Okar’s suggestion of collaboration indicates. One of the primary questions that must be asked in addressing this issue is who or what exactly is considered the representative of the French Mandate government. For example, in 1922 the French military authorities and the French governor in Beirut seem not to have an identical policy towards the Armenian refugees. In 1922 Karen Jeppe reported to the League of Nations that she encountered resistance from the French authorities in carrying out her work on behalf of the League of Nations. Specifically, she complained to General Gouraud, French governor in Syria residing in Beirut, and to Dame Rachel Crowdy, head of the Social Section at the League of Nations in Geneva, about the lack of cooperation she encountered from the French military authorities in Syria. According to Jeppe’s letters to General Gouraud and Dame Crowdy the French authorities refused permission for her to send a local man into the area between Tel Abiad, Rakka and Deir el-Zor claiming it was unsafe; however, Jeppe suspected that in fact the French military was wary that efforts to release Armenian women and children from Arab households would antagonize the local population. For this reason, Jeppe sought to reassure the French military authorities that her goal was merely to let Armenians in Arab households know that they could rejoin their community if they choose and not to seize anybody (Jeppe 17 June 1922). In contrast to the obstruction by the French military authorities, the French authorities in Beirut approved schemes to settle Armenian refugees in agricultural colonies in Syria. The differences in responses to Jeppe’s work among the refugees indicate that the various branches of the Mandate authorities could and did have different agendas and policies and that it may be inaccurate to speak of a single policy towards the refugee population. The single most consistent objective in regard to the Armenian population held by the Mandate authorities and humanitarian organizations alike, including Karen Jeppe’s League-sponsored work, was to not ignite religious or communal tensions. An example of this is the policy of settling Armenian refugees on land to stimulate agricultural development, although in this policy too the French Mandate state did not always
offer consistent support as shall be argued below.

Karen Jeppe considered agricultural settlements a key feature in her plans to help integrate Armenians into Syria. From the onset of her work Jeppe worried that Armenians would have difficulty in making roots in Syria as it was not their native land; therefore, her policies were designed to minimize the chance of backlash against the refugee population. In order to accomplish this she praised the Arabs as "patient," but devised strategies so that their patience would not be taxed. Therefore, when she considered how to encourage Armenians to become self-supporting and to not rely indefinitely on humanitarian aid, she advocated employment outside crowded Aleppo. Although her training workshop helped prepare male refugees to work in shoemaking and carpentry, she also promoted agriculture as beneficial to the Syrian economy as well as an occupation suited to those refugees who were accustomed to farm labour and, lastly, as an occupation which would relieve competition between refugees and Arabs for jobs in the cities (Jeppe 1926). In her years in Urfa, Jeppe had successfully promoted peaceful relations between the local Armenian and Muslim populations and she sought to reproduce that success in Syria (Kauffeldt 2006:141).

In a chapter on Karen Jeppe, historian Jonas Kauffeldt relates that a Bedouin sheikh, Hadjim Pasha, desired to have Armenians engaged in agriculture settle on lands his tribe controlled. Consequently, in 1924 Karen Jeppe and Hadjim Pasha negotiated a deal whereby a select group of Armenians, receiving local Arab protection, were established as farmers on Hadjim Pasha’s tribe’s lands. Jeppe, on behalf of the League of Nations, pledged to have a dam constructed for irrigation of the lands, the expenses of which would be divided and paid for by Hadjim Pasha and the League. Hadjim Pasha also promised that he and his tribe would cover the expense of relocating a group of thirty Armenians in this settlement (Kauffeldt 2006:141). This first settlement at Tel Samen was successful and soon consisted of sixty families and was quickly followed by another such settlement at Tel Armen (Kauffeldt 2006:141-144). The Mandate authorities supported Jeppe’s agricultural settlement activities until 1925 when, as Jonas Kauffeldt suggests, the French Mandate government, leery of the League of Nations having too much power, sought to institute a policy of restraint (Kauffeldt 2006:142). This led to arguments between Jeppe and General Maurice Sarrail, the High Commissioner of Syria (Kauffeldt 2006:142).

In times of cooperation the French Mandate government invited
assistance from the League’s High Commissioner for Refugees in making policy and providing funds for refugee care in Syria, although all such efforts required the approval of the Mandate government and seem to have usually involved French agencies managing the administration of relief. An example of this is evident in the Mandatory state’s handling of refugee resettlement and the drought crisis in 1926. In 1926 the High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations was invited by the Mandatory power to find an alternative to the refugee camp. The French Mandate state desired to close down the refugee camps for three principal reasons: a) the camps were viewed as centres of disease which could cause epidemics throughout the country, b) as dangerous to public safety both in terms of conflict within the camps and in terms of relations between its inhabitants and the surrounding populations, and c) as breeding grounds of moral corruption instilling dependence on aid (Secretariat 1929:1). The High Commissioner of Refugees sent a delegate to examine conditions and to suggest an alternate housing and employment solution to the camps. The plan devised was the creation of agricultural settlements in Syrian territory in which residents were expected to become self-supporting. As this resettlement plan was being implemented, however, a drought occurred and a crisis of how to feed the newly-settled refugees preoccupied both the Mandate state and the League’s Refugee office. Assistance was mobilized for the drought crisis through the International Red Cross but with health care managed by the French Red Cross and paid for by the American Red Cross (Secretariat 1929:2-7).

In terms of the French Mandate’s approach to the administration of internal Armenian communal life, historian Nicola Migliorino argues that because the Mandatory state did not adopt an official religion this allowed minorities the sorts of autonomies they had been accustomed to under the Ottoman millet system. Therefore, legal matters pertaining to personal status, such as marriage, divorce, birth registration and inheritance, were governed by Armenian religious and communal institutions, themselves based on the Ottoman Armenian constitution of 1863 (Migliorino 2004:91-96). Migliorino also notes that while the Mandate government offered Armenians living there citizenship in 1924-1925, and by doing so giving them the right to participate in elections, many did not vote because they were more concerned with internal Armenian politics (Migliorino 2004:99-103).
The French Mandate authorities also censored the Armenian press as it did the Arab press. Migliorino contends that although officially there were guarantees of the freedom of the press in practice the French authorities promoted those Armenian and Arab newspapers which endorsed their policies and suppressed those which did not. Thus, the Armenian communist press, which was anti-Mandate rule, was regularly censored as was at times the Hunchak (an Armenian political party) press in Aleppo (Migliorino 2004:121).

Migliorino argues that overall, particularly among the inmates of the refugee camps, the prevailing attitude towards the Mandatory state was indifference until the 1930s when alliances began to be made between Armenians and Arab political movements (Migliorino 2004:103-106). While the 1930s are outside of the scope of this article, here I would like to suggest that Armenian attitudes towards the French Mandate were mixed. The French evacuation of Cilicia in 1921, after having encouraged Armenians to return to Cilicia, caused the large refugee influx into Syrian territory in the years 1922 and 1923, which was described as harsh and disorganized by Dr. Mabel Elliot, the American doctor in charge of a relief hospital in Marash, and left many Armenians distrustful of the French authorities (Barton 1930:144-147). While Lust-Okar’s contention that allowing Armenians to join the French army was a means to promote Armenian allegiance to the French state may be true, although, curiously, Lust-Okar does not provide statistics or any other sort of documentary evidence for this claim, it does not automatically follow that this objective was fulfilled (Lust-Okar 1996:54). Many Armenians may have felt as the family of Dirouhi Highgas did when two of Dirouhi’s uncles joined the French army. She comments that the family was simply relieved that the two men would be responsible for their own living and would no longer be a burden on the family’s meagre financial resources (Highgas 1985:101). This response is not indicative of great loyalty to the Mandate government and by 1923 both uncles had been discharged from the army with one finding work in a store and the other unemployed (Highgas 1985:145-6). Moreover, the French Mandate government’s plan in 1926 to relocate Armenians from Aleppo and others cities into agricultural settlements in rural areas was resisted by the Armenian leadership and refugees (Migliorino 2004:133).
Survival Strategies of the Armenian Refugees

At this juncture it is necessary to consider the survival strategies refugees developed between 1915 and 1930 in order to uncover how the refugees responded to humanitarian and governmental policies and adapted to living conditions in Aleppo. Armenian refugees in Aleppo were faced with the problem of how to survive and rebuild lives and communities in a foreign country with an unfamiliar language. As Coudou Bop notes in her study of post-conflict reconstruction it is common for refugees and others emerging from conflict to lack the proper education and training needed to find employment in the aftermath of conflict (Bop 2001:32). Armenian refugees in the first half of the twentieth century were no different than those in the late twentieth century in that respect as many of the refugees expressed regret and anger over interrupted education and the resulting hardships this engendered when trying to rebuild their lives in Syria (Derdarian 1996:214).

As discussed earlier the policies of humanitarian agencies in cooperation with the Mandate state advocated skills training programmes or encouraged agricultural development as a way through which refugees could support and feed themselves. In addition to the policies of these agencies, however, Armenian refugees drew on the survival strategies they had developed during the Armenian Genocide. In the case of women, societal and cultural attitudes about proper female behaviour influenced what women were able to achieve. For example, as a young woman in Aleppo Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas wanted to help her family and dreamed of becoming a fashion designer after she graduated from dressmaking school. However, she commented that she knew this was impossible because as she later wrote “Armenian girls—at least in our economic and social strata—simply did not go to college or have ‘careers’” (Highgas 1985:158). Her mother told her that the only route open to her to help the family and live comfortably was to marry an Armenian-American and go to the United States, which she did (Highgas 1985:165-6).

Examining restrictions experienced by female refugees and the ways in which women’s survival techniques were able to surmount these restrictions helps historians to see women as more than victims and acknowledges what Anu Pillay has termed the “specific competencies” women used in order to survive (Pillay 2001:39). When
examining the stories of refugee women, and it must be said that due to the particular nature of the way in which the Armenian Genocide was carried out, a large proportion of the refugees were female or children, it is evident that women refugees employed a variety of strategies in order to keep themselves, and in many cases other family members, alive (Derderian 2005:2). Such strategies include use of bribes, judicious management of family resources, offering to work in exchange for shelter, and a system of barter and trade in order to improve her own and her family's circumstances. An example of the latter is found in Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas narration of how in 1919 her mother sold the excess bread they received from the Red Cross in order to buy material with which to make desperately needed clothes for Dirouhi and her sister who were dressed in rags (Highgas 1985:100).

Very often survival strategies called upon women to make decisions in ways that the women and their children were not accustomed to. For example, Kerop Bedoukian describes how his mother acted as leader for forty-two people during the deportation. With other adult women, her daughter, and aunts, Bedoukian’s mother managed the group’s financial resources, carefully distributed scarce food resources, and organized care for small children and an elderly paralyzed mother-in-law (Bedoukian 1978:16). Bedoukian later remarked “I felt proud of my mother. Every time in an extreme emergency when I expected her to buckle under, she would come through” (Bedoukian 1978:22).

It is clear in many accounts by Armenian refugee survivors and the documentation amassed under the League of Nations’ reclamation of Armenian refugees programme that Armenian refugees created networks of assistance to other refugees, and in particular, child refugees. During the Armenian Genocide such assistance networks consisted of offering food to others in need, allowing the vulnerable to join and travel with a family group, and sharing information. These assistance networks continued in the aftermath when Armenian women informed other Armenians, women, young men and children, that there were Armenians left alive in Aleppo, and in some cases helped others to escape from households where they were not free to leave. Although it was more common for adult Armenian men, particularly chauffeurs, to inform Armenians living in villages or with nomadic tribes of the possibility of rejoining the Armenian community
in Aleppo, the records of the Reception House identify several cases of Armenian women providing information and assistance to other women in captivity (Admission Files 1922).

One of principal survival strategies, and one often based on networks of assistance, was the securing of employment. Although the convention prior to displacement was for Armenian men to work for wages and women to engage in domestic labour, after they were made refugees many women had no choice but to work for wages. Armenian memoir accounts make it very clear that most women refugees worked in Aleppo to support themselves and family members too. They also assisted other refugees in securing employment. Vergeen Kalendarian testifies that when she was a young refugee in Aleppo there was a great demand for nurses and that she got a job in nursing through the assistance of another refugee woman, Anoush Bardizbanian, who was working at the Ramanazania military Hospital (Derdarian 1996:165). Nurses were paid in food and cash. Vergeen recounted the payment nurses received was as follows:

"two loaves of small, round bread everyday; and, each month two bars of soap, one pound of granulated sugar, half of a freshly slaughtered lamb, and one midijia which was almost equivalent to a dollar." (Derdarian 1996:172)

The majority of the nurses at the hospital where Vergeen worked had family members at home and so used this pay to feed them (Derdarian 1996:173). Additionally, at the hospital Vergeen learned much more than basic nursing and moved on to more complex work there due to her intelligence, her hard work and the encouragement of other Armenian nurses in the hospital (Derdarian 1996:171). In Vergeen's situation it is evident that Armenian women's networks continued to flourish during settlement in Aleppo as Vergeen was helped by numerous Armenian women to find jobs and gain further skills. At the end of the war, the Armenian nurse who was her mentor encouraged her to teach school to the newly-arrived orphans. When Vergeen expressed a lack of confidence in her ability to teach, her mentor introduced her to another young Armenian woman working as a teacher who was able to provide Vergeen with some training for a teaching position (Derdarian 1996:215-6).

It appears that the strategies and patterns of assistance developed
by Armenian women during deportation were also utilized by Armenian women refugees after settlement in Aleppo, particularly in aiding Armenian women in finding employment in hospitals, the nursing profession and in teaching, occupations which typically provided Armenian refugees with the most secure positions available at that time.

In conclusion from 1915 to 1930 the city of Aleppo was the centre of Armenian refugee migration and as a consequence became the centre of international humanitarian relief efforts. The humanitarian relief efforts were international in scope consisting of Armenian, American and European aid and constituted one of the earliest refugee programmes by the international body of the newly-formed League of Nations. The effectiveness of humanitarian agency and state-sponsored efforts was mixed. The League of Nations' work with refugees in Aleppo was chronically underfunded and this fact limited the number of people helped and the scale of assistance which could be offered. The policies of the French Mandate government directed at the Armenian refugee population were not consistent in the ten years between 1920 and 1930 and further research is required and additional questions must be asked in order to uncover the complex relationship between the state and the refugee population. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the efforts by refugees to care for themselves, family members and friends for it was these efforts that formed the basis of Armenian communal building in Aleppo and enabled refugees to build new lives and networks in the aftermath of genocide.

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