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(RE)CONSTRUCTING HOMELANDS BETWEEN PRECARIETY AND INTENTIONALITY: SYRIAN ARMENIANS IN ARMENIA

Abstract

Syrian refugees from the war which has been waging since 2011 now number more than 6.4 million. Of these, an estimated 24,000 Syrians of ethnic Armenian origin have arrived in the Republic of Armenia since 2011. Government sources estimate the number of those who have stayed to number around 14,000. Some have moved to other destinations perceived to hold better prospects, whether temporarily or with a view to stay permanently; others have returned to rebuild their lives in Syria. In mapping these multidirectional movements, it is apparent that Syrian Armenians' encounter with Armenia is a process of continuous negotiation – Armenia is alternately a site of refuge, a historic or potential homeland, and a temporary transit. While previous studies have acknowledged the economic, social, and political challenges of settling in Armenia, the 2020 war in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh and its continuing reverberations at both the local and the wider geopolitical levels add a layer of critical precarity that is qualitatively different. This article argues that the 2020 war and its continuing violences have rendered Armenia a precarious homeland for Syrian Armenian refugees. Such precarity potentially jeopardizes the intentionality of many Syrian Armenians to stay in Armenia.

خلاصة

يبلغ عدد اللاجئين السوريين من الحرب الدائرة منذ عام 2011 أكثر من 6.4 مليون. ومن بين هؤلاء، وصل ما يقدر بنحو 24000 سوري (معظمهم من أصل أرمني إلى جمهورية أرمينيا منذ عام 2011). وتقدر المصادر الحكومية عدد الذين بقوا بحوالي 14000 شخص. وقد انتقل البعض إلى وجهات أخرى يُنظر إليها على أنها تحمل آفاقاً أفضل، سواء بشكل مؤقت أو بهدف البقاء بشكل دائم؛ وعاد آخرون لإعادة بناء حياتهم في سوريا. من خلال رسم خريطة لهذه الحركات متعددة الاتجاهات، من الواضح أن لقاء الأرمن السوريين مع أرمينيا هو عملية تفاوض مستمرة – أرمينيا هي بالتناوب موقع ملجأ، ووطن تاريخي أو محتمل، وعبور مؤقت. في حين أقرت الدراسات السابقة بالتحديات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والسياسية للاستيطان في أرمينيا فإن حرب عام 2020 في آرتساخ-ناغورنو كاراباخ وأصدائها المستمرة على المستويين المحلي والجيوسياسي الأوسع تضيف طبقة من عدم الاستقرار الحرج الذي يختلف نوعياً. يجادل هذا المقال بأن حرب 2020 وأعمال العنف المستمرة فيها جعلت أرمينيا وطناً محفوظاً بالخطوط للاجئين الأرمن السوريين. ومن المحتمل أن تقوض هذه الهشاشة نية العديد من الأرمن السوريين للبقاء في أرمينيا.



INTRODUCTION¹

The past was nice. We used to socialize and work with Armenians in Syria. The same here, just the opportunities are not so much. It is only Yerevan that is more or less active. I cannot predict anything for the future because the world is not stable and everything could happen tomorrow.

The past was more certain, I knew what I (was) going to do in every phase of my life, but now everything is unpredictable. I want my future to be like my past in Syria and I am doing everything for it.

The past and the present are similar: there was a war in the past and there is a war in the present. I do not know what will be in the future, but I wish there was peace.²

These three young voices reflect the Syrian Armenian experience of displacement, moving from their generations-long homes in war-torn Syria to an embattled Armenia. While Syria is considered devastated, the process of homemaking in Armenia is far from certain or secure. The 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh (also known by Armenians as Artsakh) may have “ended” but it was by no means “over,” as it cast long shadows and fueled a deep-seated sense of insecurity among all Armenians in Armenia.

On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan waged war on Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in over 7,000 deaths, and ending six weeks later by a ceasefire brokered by Russia. On 9 November 2020, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed a statement that gave Azerbaijan control over the parts of Nagorno-Karabakh it captured during the war, as well as seven adjacent territories. In this period, almost 100,000 Armenians from Karabakh were forcefully displaced to Armenia and relegated to a “refugee-like”³ situation. Of these, about 40,000 never returned. From December 2022 the population of 120,000 living in the truncated Karabakh were subjected to a slow death via Azerbaijan’s nine-month-long aid blockade, which prevented even the International Committee of the Red Cross from entering via the Lachin Corridor, its only

connection to Armenia (and the world).⁴This escalating humanitarian crisis left Armenians fearful of an imminent existential catastrophe and in a heightened state of anxiety.⁵ Azerbaijan launched an all-out military offensive on Karabakh on 19 September 2023, leading almost the entire beleaguered population to flee for their lives to the Republic of Armenia.⁶ Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian home for more than two millennia, is now in the hands of Azerbaijan; Karabakh's Armenian presence and future has been wiped out,⁷ alongside a continuous erasure of its Armenian past⁸ and ceaseless threats to the integrity of Armenia's borders.⁹

With the influx of 150,000 Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, one in 20 people of the 3 million population of Armenia is now a refugee from Artsakh¹⁰ and Armenia faces immense challenges in accommodating them.¹¹ While the focus is understandably on this urgent situation, the 2020 war's impact and continuing aftermath on other refugees and migrants in Armenia have been relatively sidelined. Though originating from distinct situations, Syrian Armenian and Karabakh Armenian refugees share the experience of war, forced displacement, loss, and trauma. While recognizing their differences, it is worthwhile to ask how one war's reverberations impact another war's victims, in their new shared space, particularly as that potential homeland is also in a precarious situation. This article focuses on the impact of the 2020 war on Syrian Armenians in Armenia and was written before the complete loss and "death" of Nagorno-Karabakh¹² in 2023.

Syrian refugees from the war which has been waging since 2011 now number more than 6.4 million.¹³ Of these, an estimated 24,000 Syrians of ethnic Armenian origin have arrived in the Republic of Armenia since 2011. The Government and the local UNHCR office (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) estimate those who have stayed to number around 14,000.¹⁴ Some have moved to other destinations perceived to hold more prospects, whether temporarily or with a view to stay permanently, whereas some have returned to rebuild Syria. In mapping these multidirectional movements, it is clear that Syrian Armenians' encounter with Armenia is a process of constant negotiation – Armenia is alternately a site of refuge, a historic or potential homeland, and a temporary transit. Local, diasporan, and international actors, their remits and agendas, all play a role, but it is the individual, an active agent in negotiating their trajectory, that must be continuously re-centered to counter regimes,¹⁵ narratives, and structures that have flattened, reduced, and silenced.¹⁶ Elsewhere I have suggested the need for a broader conceptualization of the Middle

East “as a transnational terrain that includes the Republic of Armenia and is a vibrant site of diasporan life.”¹⁷ By thinking transnationally rather than through the prism of “methodological nationalism,”¹⁸ we are able to engage with the everyday realities of people’s movements and trajectories without assuming sedentariness, permanence, or homogeneity. We also liberate migration (forced and voluntary) from judgment, recognizing that people move, sometimes multiple times, in response to different pressures, and have always done so.

Most Syrian arrivals in Armenia are ethnically Armenian, descended from Ottoman Armenians, making them both familiar and foreign to Armenia and to local Armenians (*Hayastansis*). Armenia is the remnant site of eastern Armenia, and as the Armenian state, it can lay claim to western Armenians from the former Ottoman lands. Eastern and western Armenia—the former influenced by Ottoman (and Arab) culture, the latter by Russian and Persian—were differentiated by language and culture more broadly. The Syrian Armenian culture is typical of Middle Eastern Armenianness and the western, established diaspora more widely; most members of these communities trace their roots to the 1915–1923 genocide perpetrated by the Young Turks and their ancestral homes in Ottoman Armenia.¹⁹ As such, the Syrian Armenians’ encounter with Armenia is a meeting between western and eastern Armenian experience, to put it reductively. Obviously, the past three decades have meant that these two broad “types” of Armenian experience have become better acquainted. Nonetheless, there is a common feeling that there exists a mutual ignorance—local Armenians (*Hayastanis*) ignorant of the western diaspora experience, and the diaspora ignorant of the Soviet experience and legacies that have shaped contemporary Armenian society. One Syrian respondent who moved to Armenia as a child in the late 1990s noted the recent change:

When I was growing up here, the local Armenians spoke about diaspora but they didn’t really understand what it really meant . . . what it’s like to be a diasporan Armenian. They had some ideas. They could ask you, where are your ancestors from? . . . But they would never understand what it’s like to live in another country and be a minority there. And this connection was resolved by modern day technology. Now that you have Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, whatever, all these social media platforms, it’s easier for them to connect and see what it’s like, to hear stories on a more regular and fresh basis,

as opposed to generationally – grandpa tells it to the son, the son tells it to the grandkid and stuff like that.²⁰

For many Syrian Armenians, being in Armenia is not a comfortable or easy position, as they are caught between the home of attachment (Syria) and the new potential home of “emplacement” that results from forced migration. Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar’s definition of emplacement as “the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city”²¹ is a good way of conceptualizing their situation. While the state frames Syrian Armenian arrivals as a “homecoming,” this is rarely the narrative of the Syrians themselves whose arrival has been precipitated by war and carried varying degrees of choice. In my own work I have introduced the concept of Armenia as “step-homeland” for contemporary western diasporans encapsulating

a situation where two entities that are not related by descent are forced into a familial relationship by external forces; that is, it is not a naturally occurring relationship but one that is forged through circumstances. The sense of step-ness also carries with it connotations of difficulty and a need for adjustment by both parties.²²

As a study of “emplacement” and its more personal “home-making,”²³ the Syrian Armenian case has many layers. While previous studies have acknowledged the economic, social, and political challenges of settling in Armenia, the 2020 war in Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh and its continuing reverberations at both the local and the wider geopolitical levels add a layer of critical precarity that is qualitatively different. Such precarity jeopardizes the intentionality of many Syrian Armenians to stay in Armenia.²⁴

This article builds on the literature on the role of a diaspora “homeland,” in claiming diasporans as part of its nation-building process, and in offering sanctuary and protection in times of new and ongoing crisis. In this extraordinary case, diasporans have been forcefully displaced from (an actively constructed, rooted, and nurtured) home in diaspora and compelled to take refuge in a relatively unfamiliar “step-homeland,” one which is neither stable nor secure. The case of Syrian Armenians is disruptive to prevailing linear notions of home, homeland, nation, and diaspora. It invites us to engage more

substantially with the nuances and complexities of multilayered identities reconfigured through wars and continuing precarity.

FRAMING AND APPROACH

This research is situated within the conceptual concerns of contemporary diaspora studies, and refugee and migration studies, connected through wider questions about homes and homelands, displacement, and belonging. The analytical framework and the ethnographic approach are influenced by interdisciplinary scholarship spanning the humanities and social sciences. The wider project that this article draws from uses mixed methods methodologies.²⁵ The quantitative research is grounded in a range of surveys, the results of which fall outside the remit of this article and expertise of this author.²⁶ The qualitative dimension of this research project was based on interviews with young (aged 20–39) individuals from Syria, Iran, Russia, Lebanon, and Artsakh; local Armenians; and focus groups comprised of all these constituencies in 2021–22. In this article, I focus only on the Syrians in Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia. In addition, in May 2022, the project conducted several interviews with diasporans from Europe and the Middle East who were living in Armenia temporarily, as well as with a range of stakeholders, academics, experts, and state and civil society actors working with migrants and refugees. This article draws upon four different focus groups conducted with young Syrian Armenians,²⁷ as well as interviews with stakeholders and experts.²⁸ Apart from when individuals speak in their official capacity, all interviews and focus groups were anonymized.²⁹ This article applies the “thick description”³⁰ interpretation to fieldwork findings. In addition, I draw from insights, interviews, and observation-participation from my earlier period of fieldwork in Armenia in November 2016.

The process of creative collaboration with a team of sociologists made this a dynamic research experience: the methodology and analysis reflect this spirit. While writing remains a solitary process, I remain in constant conversation (in my head, online, and in person) with both my interlocutors and colleagues in Armenia to whom I am most grateful, and my Stirling colleagues who were thoughtfully engaged throughout. As a diasporan British Armenian originally from Cyprus, I had to exercise self-reflexivity throughout the project. My positionality helped me connect with other diasporans, including Syrians, as I speak western Armenian and lived in the Middle East for many years. This was less the case when meeting with local Armenians—in some cases I felt it was somewhat of a barrier and a

hindrance. Certainly, preconceptions abound in all such fieldwork, and I acknowledge my subjectivity in these encounters and my complicated insider/outsider liminality.

This article draws upon the qualitative findings of the research project and situates itself in the body of work that recognizes that refugees/migrants/displaced (however they see themselves) are the best articulators of their paths, however limited their parameters might be. This people-centered approach relies on interviews, conversations, and biographical reflection in order to critically engage with and understand trajectories that are often contradictory, ambivalent, and shifting. Interviews and focus groups also allow the subject to self-reflect and establish narrative authority over their past, present, and future. As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh reminds us, “People who are involved in diverse migratory processes conceptualize their own situations, positions, and responses as everyday theorists rather than as providers of ‘data’ to be analyzed to provide the materials for conceptual and theoretical scholarship.”³¹

This ethnographically informed paper offers a “way in” to give platform to the experiences and trajectories of those who are more often objects rather than subjects of their plights. The abundant use of direct recorded/transcribed quotes from the respondents aims to make them present and active, not only so we *hear* their voices but also *listen* to what they say. Alongside recorded interviews and more casual meetings, fieldwork in Armenia was ethnography of the “deep hanging out”³² kind. This included frequenting Syrian spaces—restaurants, shops, market stalls—as well as striking up conversations naturally when the opportunity presented itself. Elsewhere I have written about how Levantine restaurants are sites of “diasporisation”—“spaces where locals and diasporans partake in a more inclusive and expansive Armenian identity.”³³ For Syrians they are also the sites where diaspora identities are being professed, performed, and validated. In the familiarity of the food, the music, the western Armenian language, the pictures and symbols, smells and tastes of Syrian Armenian life, in the company of other (Syrian) Armenians, Syrians are retrieving a lost home, remembering and reconstructing its comforts amid precarity. In the new homeland, diaspora identities are being reinterpreted and transmitted.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Armenian Syria

Armenian life in Syria can be traced back centuries, but the modern

community is mostly composed of genocide survivors from 1915 onwards.³⁴ Aleppo was a hub in this period, and a site of relief and rescue. The mandate authorities estimated that by 1923 over 200,000 Armenians had passed through Aleppo;³⁵ orphanages and camps were set up throughout the Middle East for the Armenian survivors. Another distinct wave of arrivals followed after the French ceded the province of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1938, leading 40,000 Armenians from Cilicia to flee to Syria and Lebanon. By 1946 refugee camps had become Armenian neighborhoods; Cilician/Ottoman Armenia was “reconstructed” in Syria and Lebanon.³⁶

Initially Armenian refugees faced some hostility and attack by the local population and by Syrian nationalists.³⁷ The established wealthy Armenian community *Arman al-Qadim* (Old Armenians) that had grown in Aleppo were initially lukewarm in their reception of these desperate co-ethnics, fearing the impact it would have on their own status.³⁸ Once it was clear that the refugees were there to recover and rebuild, things calmed down on all fronts. In time the refugee Armenians became integrated and even admired as an exemplary minority community. Historians have written vividly about the survival, resilience, and renaissance of this community as a “transformation from abject poverty into an urban proto-middle class,”³⁹ as well as about the role they played in defining the contours of the Syrian nation and state,⁴⁰ and the birth of modern humanitarianism.⁴¹

The Armenians were concentrated in Aleppo, with smaller communities in Damascus, Jarablus, Der Zor, Qamishli, Latakia, Homs, Hama, and Kessab. Numbering 125,000 in 1946 when Syria gained independence, the community peaked at 150,000 in the 1960s.⁴² The 1950s–70s in Syria was a period of pressure on many fronts, leading to a general decline and continuous emigration.⁴³ Hratch Tchilingirian, using local church sources alongside publications by historians, estimates that the 150,000 peak held until 1975, with a steady decline such that the population was 70,000 in 2003 and dropped to 35,000 in 2020.⁴⁴ Some of the latter figures are likely to include those who are living transnational lives between Syria and Armenia.

The Syrian Experience of Armenia

Before the 2020 Artsakh war, the Syrians were the latest significant wave of displaced ethnic Armenians forced to take refuge in Armenia due to war in their home countries. Prior arrivals include Iraqi, Iranian, and Lebanese Armenians, and the Armenians from Azerbaijan in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. It is important to differentiate between groups

of refugee and migrant arrivals, as the idea that they are all Armenian of some description and therefore can smoothly slot into the Republic of Armenia is far from the case. It also risks homogenizing very diverse constituencies, most of whom are very aware of the intra-diaspora differences in their everyday interactions and their sense of self. This labeling/identification within the Armenian diaspora persists, reflecting people's layered identities and multiple attachments, but also because each of these diaspora identities—for example, *Syriahay* (Syrian), more particularly, *Haleptsi* (Allepine) or *Kessabtsi* (from Kessab), and *Lipannahay* (Lebanese), more particularly *Beiruitsi* (from Beirut) or *Anjartsi* (from Anjar)—carries with it cultural connotations and historic reverberations that most other diasporans are familiar with. It is a shorthand way of introducing oneself as it presents one's ancestral path and collective story, and also acts as a way of connection and mutual recognition within the wider Armenian collectivity.

Decades earlier, Syrians were a substantial component of the “*nerkaght*” (gathering in) “repatriation” program of Soviet Armenia from the 1920s to the 1960s (mostly in the period June 1946 to December 1947), as the Soviet authorities and some diaspora organizations tried to promote Armenia as a homeland for all Armenians, and also destabilize the diaspora.⁴⁵ The move from diaspora to “homeland” was traumatic and disappointing for many of these migrants, such that many of them “returned” to the diaspora when they could. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia has sought to actively build relations with the diaspora and rebrand itself as a “homeland” for diasporans.⁴⁶ From the late 1990s there has been a small-scale trend of diasporan Armenians forging connections with Armenia—for business, study, philanthropy, and as visitors and residents of varying terms. This included Syrians “trying out” living in Armenia, living “in between” the two homes, exploring options, and planning to stay longer term depending on opportunities.⁴⁷ So when the civil war broke out, some Syrian Armenians had already established connections with Armenia and thus were able to mobilize and build on these.

The contemporary Syrian experience in Armenia is a varied one, encompassing a range of experiences differentiated by factors including: wealth and means; date and manner of arrival; class and connections; and educational and professional background. All this constructs a multilayered experience, interpreted variously as exile, displacement, migration, or homecoming by the Syrians themselves, the state and non-state actors, and local population. The Syrian Armenians have been the object of some interest in the academy, the media, and in policy work, such that there is a burgeoning literature

since 2011. The unusual situation of being an ethnic Armenian refugee in Armenia has been widely discussed, especially as to whether they are considered migrants, refugees, repatriates, or diasporan returnees.⁴⁸ There is more interest in the Syrian arrivals than there has been in previous waves of arrivals; this heightened interest reflects the widespread perception in Armenia that the state and civil society have supported Syrians more than other arrivals, particularly those from Artsakh who have been relatively neglected for decades. Themes range from the role of the state in the political, economic, and social integration of Syrian Armenians;⁴⁹ the communication problems of eastern and western Armenian;⁵⁰ their “social alienation”;⁵¹ what role the church plays;⁵² the role of civil society actors;⁵³ and their contribution to Armenian cuisine and food industry.⁵⁴

This article seeks to add to this body of work by looking at the impact that the 2020 war and its continuing reverberations have on the Syrian Armenians. It engages specifically with Armenia as a precarious homeland and seeks to situate this particular case of displacement and emplacement within the wider grassroots cosmopolitanism of the Yerevan urban landscape and broader geopolitical precarities.

THE “GLOBAL EAST,” “URBAN SOCIABILITIES,” AND INTERSECTIONS

The Armenian case study’s wider importance is its contribution to the neglected study of what Martin Müller calls “the East,” defined as “a predicament of being not so much on the margins as in the interstices between North and South.”⁵⁵ In this category, Müller places “most societies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union” characterized by a

liminality that makes debates on the Global North and Global South pass by the East: not out of spite, but because the East does not fit . . . included neither in the North nor in the South, stuck in stasis, the East has disappeared from ‘the global’ at large.⁵⁶

Müller’s argument clearly applies to the Armenian case. The marginality of Armenian studies in the academy broadly, in traditional area studies and Middle East studies specifically,⁵⁷ reflects its peripherality (if not complete absence) in global media attention, even at times of existential crisis.⁵⁸ Müller urges us to put “the East back on

the map of knowledge production” by rebranding it the “Global East,” different from, yet connected to, the rest of the world” not just as

an important epistemic move for people who live in the Global East, valorising the distinctiveness and connectedness of their experience, and for scholars who work on the Global East, who are often at a loss as to how to position their subject in global scholarship that partitions the world into North and South.⁵⁹

This article seeks to respond to Müller’s call by focusing on a little-studied case with transnational and international relevance. The lens of the “Global East” helps us approach the Armenian terrain with a decentered gaze. The political and epistemic project of the “Global East” is not just to make connections and engage with it on its own terms, but to recognize its rich and nuanced connectivities and intersections, some familiar, others unexpected. In the following brief ethnographic description, I will draw out these burgeoning “urban sociabilities,” as defined by Glick Schiller and Çağlar, as “sociabilities of emplacement because they bring together migrant newcomers and local people who together build aspects of their social belonging to the city.”⁶⁰

For example, take the surprising cosmopolitanism of bars, restaurants, and cafes in Yerevan, where multiple languages are heard. Every resident is at least bilingual, whether local or migrant. One memorable late night we found ourselves in a busy underground bar with groups of Russians, Armenians, diasporan Armenians, Armenians from Russia and Ukraine, and others. Russian, Armenian, French, Greek, and English pop tunes play, loudly accompanied by whichever constituency knows the language, cheered on by the rest of the bar. There is an initial wariness, a sizing up of other groups, which melts into a collective relief and therapeutic release that permeates a growing comradely atmosphere. Everyone is merry but few are drunk. Smoking outside facilitates friendly introductions and conversations. The atmosphere is inclusive, but there is little mingling between groups, each of which is united by their particular shared background. Many of these Yerevan bars and cafes remind me of hipster bars in Beirut, with the clientele and servers sharing the same style and youth culture.

That multiple groups coexist with a degree of mutual familiarity and ease in Yerevan is unsurprising as there are several common intersections between groups. In this space I identify four.

Firstly, the shared Soviet past and the Russian culture/language is a strong foundational layer of the Armenian landscape. Being historically part of the same Soviet family (albeit with much variation and inequalities within) has left Russian as lingua franca as well as what western diasporans (sometimes disparagingly) call a “Russian/Soviet mentality,” which also connotes shared sensibilities and common outlooks and perspectives. The Russian language pervades the city, regularly found on menus and signage, usually along with English, occasionally Farsi,⁶¹ or Arabic. A second clear line of connectivity is Armenianness; whether one is from the diaspora, western or eastern (Iranian, Russian, Ukrainian), or local, there is a mutual recognition and understanding. In particular, the French and the Uruguayan Armenian share a common diaspora sensibility regardless of other differences. Thirdly, the experience of migration, understood as taking the decision to leave your home and settle in Yerevan as a choice, facilitates intersectional bonds between groups. This shared reference point creates a common urban sociability that encourages understanding to develop among seemingly disparate groups of arrivals, acquainted by their migrant experience. So, the Indian medical student and the Iranian businessman are united in wanting to improve their lives and those of their families. Fourthly, the connecting line of the refugee/displaced experience is a distinct one. The displaced from Artsakh or the refugee from the war in Syria are qualitatively different from migrants and newcomers from Russia or Iran, many of whom (but by no means all) are relatively privileged and have the means to sustain middle-/upper-class lives in Yerevan, and the right to return home.

These crisscrossing lines of connectivity can emerge at different points and are situational, with one being more pronounced than another at different times. Together they foster everyday interactions and relationships and facilitate urban sociability between newcomer communities to Yerevan and locals. They help create narratives and spaces for them to feel at home, navigate, and claim space in the city while also transforming it through their active presence and engagement.⁶² Gradually the intersectional spaces are widened such that that borders seem less apparent:

When we arrived Syrian and Armenian people looked very different and one could say that this is a local and this is from Syria. Now they look very similar. Sometimes I see a person and think he/she is Syrian, but then it turns out that he/she is a local.

I change my dialect in the stores because sellers do not understand me well, I have to repeat several times. Thus, I prefer to change my dialect. In taxis, I pretend that I am local, otherwise a taxi driver will take more money. Not always, but sometimes they believe that I am local.

Living in Armenia has opened, broadened my worldview, expanded it. It's given me the idea that I can expand the idea of home.⁶³

The physical urban landscape of Yerevan is dotted with artwork, statues, murals, sculptures, and historical monuments. Street art, a common feature throughout the city, demonstrates the reclaiming of public spaces particularly since the Velvet Revolution of 2018. The recent war has added another layer to these political expressions,⁶⁴ with murals and memorials of young dead soldiers emblazoned on walls in both prominent and unexpected places.⁶⁵ Commemorated as heroes, some of the dead are now icons of the Armenian cumulative trauma,⁶⁶ representing yet another generation lost and maimed by war,⁶⁷ and the quashing of lives that had barely begun before being brutally cut short. It is impossible not to be moved by the faces of these young men, many still teenagers, and by a society that displays them so prominently. One wonders whether the trauma is re-lived or processed through these everyday symbols. At Yerevan State University, where we met with our project partners, pictures of dead students adorn the classroom as a daily quasi-religious memorialization.⁶⁸ At the much smaller American University of Armenia, scholarships have been created to honor their seven dead students.⁶⁹ Whenever a conversation turns to the war, the brokenness of this small society is raw – it is rare for someone not to be connected in some way to one of the dead. The faces, bodies, and lives wrecked by war are all too present throughout the city. Away from the liveliness and revelry of the center, the underlying mood of the city is somber and the spirit is heavy; there is discernible a sense of loss and of foreboding that infuses the collective effort to look forward and build ahead. There are Armenian and Artsakh flags everywhere.

This atmosphere is exacerbated by the daily anti-government demonstrations throughout the country, continuing in the wake of the government's capitulation and the humiliating end to the 44-Day War, which left thousands dead and injured, tens of thousands displaced,

and the country in uproar and upheaval. The political maneuverings and debates extend transnationally and lie beyond the scope of this article.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the government has not toppled.⁷¹ The demonstrations we witness are generally peaceful and well-organized, and are impressive in terms of oratory, music, banners, and signs, and in diversity of constituents. There is a strong police presence, but they did not seem to carry weapons and there is no coercion or intimidation on display. The demonstration culture has strong roots—once these protests fizzle out, protests against the blockade of Artsakh by Azerbaijan take place throughout the country.

The presence of the displaced from Artsakh on the busy streets (some begging) and camped out in Opera Square in tents that bear the names of their lost villages are a poignant reminder of how the war has devastated a population that was already struggling. In the square, people are reluctant to converse with us, understandably suspicious about who we are and whose interests we serve. We are directed to the tent of a mayor of one of the displaced villages, who wearily explains the villagers' desperate plight. The sense of residual hope dying out is palpable as is our feebleness in offering any reassuring words. The war may be over, but its devastation continues and takes different forms.

Alongside the embodiments of the war, there are buskers on the streets; the cafes, restaurants, and bars are doing a brisk trade. The opera house is full; we struggle to get tickets for a show. As Armenia has not banned Russian artists like some other countries, many Russians artists are scheduling engagements in Armenia, which has a vibrant artistic and cultural scene. One European NGO worker tells me that he is enjoying world class performances for a fraction of the price as compared with venues outside Armenia, and is at a concert, ballet, or opera almost every night.

Since the war in Ukraine, Armenia has been the recipient of both Russians and Ukrainians,⁷² some of whom have Armenian backgrounds or connections. It is important not to homogenize these groups, as identities are complicated and in practice do not fall easily into fixed categories. Families are often mixed ethnically/religiously. One of the many casualties of the war is that there is little space for nuance and subtleties, which are the reality of many people's identities. As a "safe haven,"⁷³ Armenia, similar to other post-Soviet republics like Georgia and other countries that do not require Russians to acquire an entry visa, has proved a good alternative base for Russians and Russian businesses that relocate to avoid sanctions. The presence of a historic Russian community in Armenia,⁷⁴ centuries of entangled lives and culture, ease of access and proximity to Russia, and relative

affordability makes Armenia an attractive option for Russians protesting and fleeing the war and the sanctions.⁷⁵ Many of them live as digital nomads and have found in Yerevan a safe and easy place to move to, or have found jobs in the “post-Soviet Silicon valley.”⁷⁶ “Everyone speaks Russian,” one young Russian woman tells us at a bar. Having relocated on her own, she is arranging for her husband and child to join her, and says they are considering staying long term, as she feels at home “but safe and better.”

“Relocant”⁷⁷ is the term of choice for Russians migrants to describe their situation, implying a move that is relatively smooth and temporary. Although it is the wealthier that are most obvious in the Yerevan urban landscape, often made visible through conspicuous consumption in restaurants, shops, cafes, and bars, there are also many Russians who are working in low paid jobs in the services and hospitality industry. The Russian-Armenian encounter is inevitably imbued with post-imperial and post-colonial subtexts. Maria Gunko, a “semi-voluntary participant-observer” of the Russian migration to Armenia identifies three types of imperial gazes among them: “the Moscow gaze, the gaze of a griever and the gaze of a giver,” saying that

these gazes are defined not only by the historical relations between Russia and Armenia, but also by the global reordering that is in-the-making, the personal characteristics of relocates, and their self-perception. The latter range from the neutral “(e) migrants” to “expats”, “political emigrants”, and “refugees”, signifying starkly different power dynamics.⁷⁸

The Russians are blamed for rents shooting up throughout Yerevan and pricing out locals and migrants alike.⁷⁹ However, it is important to note that, like the other groups, the Russians are also a diverse group along the lines of class and means, and sometimes revered, resented, or appreciated as adding cosmopolitanism to a small, relatively homogeneous society, and therefore broadening perspectives and attitudes. The Director of Pink Armenia, the community-based LGBTQ organization,⁸⁰ tells us that seeing Russians and Armenian diasporans coding as queer, “with colorful hair, a lot of piercings, and kind of this is seen as okay . . . is accepted as they are foreigners, and even if they are LGBTQ, it’s (considered) okay because one day they will leave this country.” He is “optimistic” that

when people see different styles, see different faces, identities, it will probably also change them . . . so I think it will have some positive influence on our society. The way that Diaspora Armenians are coming to Armenia during the summer a lot, so there are a lot of faces, a lot of people, that is also making changes. It doesn't matter that for example some of them really have these nationalistic views and conservative views, but at least their appearance is different . . . that can make a difference.⁸¹

Students and businessmen from India make up another distinct group of newcomers, already well established with networks and spaces of socialization. Armenians are grateful for the support of India⁸² and the local community in Yerevan during the war, as signified by one Indian restaurateur organizing food deliveries for the displaced.⁸³ Indian tourism is also on the rise. Despite a few reports of racism, the Indian population of Armenia is increasing, together with their potential impact and importance as part of the country.

CAUGHT BETWEEN INTENTIONALITY AND PRECARITY

Research on societies in the context of a recent war and continuing precarity is by nature limited and inconclusive. This analysis focuses on several themes that emerged from the findings of the fieldwork and seeks to capture the complexities of an unstable situation, where positions are in flux, that responds to changing geopolitical and local circumstances.

While many Syrians seem settled, the Artsakh war has raised questions about their plans to stay in Armenia. Respondents looked back on the decision to make a life in Armenia, while questioning its viability in a climate of insecurity. When reflecting on the temporal, the recent war featured highly in responses.

The past was nice. The present is not bad, and the future is blurred.

Yes, the past was fine. I am not sure about the present, but I hope the future will be nice.

The past was amazing. We were adapted to our city, to our neighbors, and our life. We are trying to create the same here,

but there is a lot of work we need to do. About the future . . . I have no idea about the future. I wish it was like my past, but if there is another war . . . I do not know.⁸⁴

For some, the uncertainty of the war has led to a sense that their own life decisions are also out of their hands:

It is easy to imagine that I will live here, but it is also easy to imagine that I will live in another place. I want to live here, but maybe life will push me to move to another place.

A diasporan consultant who has worked on projects in Armenia for many years said that the war had precipitated the widespread sense that “opportunities in the country are diminishing” and that that many Syrians, who had hitherto been quite settled, are “disillusioned” and reconsidering their positions. Interviews with students at the American University of Armenia confirm that the war has been a traumatic experience that will likely alter their physical trajectories:

I know so many people who actually want to leave Armenia afterwards (university). And it’s mostly concern from . . . the recent war that happened in Artsakh, and they’re afraid it’s going to happen again or something big is going to happen. So they’re just preparing, so like okay after university I’m going to leave, there are many people like that right now.⁸⁵

The war has taken “a huge toll” on so many of the students: “after that, you know, it just didn’t feel the same.” The optimism of the Velvet Revolution of 2018 has been quashed by the war and replaced by a sense of hopelessness as well as existential crisis:

People here were very hopeful before the war, like there was gonna be so many changes to Armenian society, the way things are over here, after the war it just feels like everybody is gone, especially if I’m talking about Armenian society as a whole, I would say people have gone careless. If you can see now there are a lot of sports cars on the streets, right now. This is because people are so careless to the point they’re like “okay I’m going to spend my money like there’s no tomorrow,” stuff like that.

... People have grown this attitude of “who cares what’s going to happen anymore,” like we’re all going to die in the end.

Youth who have options (more than Armenian citizenship, etc.) or are financially secure/privileged are weighing the possibilities of moving somewhere safer that could offer them a more stable life and better long-term prospects, regardless of any commitment or attachment to Armenia. A common refrain was:

We just need peace here. The war is the reason that people want to leave the country. Otherwise, I can spend the rest of my life here.⁸⁶

Many respondents cited difficulties in finding decent jobs and being able to make a sustainable living. The demands of everyday life are pressing concerns in determining long-term plans, regardless of the intention to stay:

I think I will stay here if I have a job and can earn a living. Otherwise, maybe I will think about moving abroad.

If there is a job, everything will be fine. We just need a job, because we need to pay for a house.

The influx of displaced/refugees from Artsakh and arrivals from Russia and Ukraine have impacted what is a small economy. Coupled with the threat of another war and political situation, this feeling of instability has a detrimental effect on both physical and mental survival, as well as a sense of agency over the future:

Many people from Artsakh moved to Armenia, the number of jobs decreased, the prices increased. We do not know what the future will bring.

The war influenced us very much. First of all, so many people died. In the future, I hope there will not be war anymore. We are worried about our children. Yes, I would agree that the

number of jobs decreased. I hope there will not be a war and Armenia will be able to develop.

The theme of basic struggle was echoed by many respondents. A number of organizations are engaged with helping newcomers to settle into Armenia, in practical ways.⁸⁷ Repat Armenia has been leading the way for years, helping “repats” (mostly ethnic Armenians from other countries) in every stage of moving to and settling in Armenia.⁸⁸ A major focus is helping them find jobs and connecting them to potential employers and business opportunities. Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prime beneficiaries had been Syrians from the civil war, whereas the most recent mass “repats” are from Russia.⁸⁹ In comparison, Syrians find it harder to find good employment and integrate—not knowing Russian, coming from a non-Soviet background and culture—and are not as familiar or understood by locals:

When we arrived people called us Arabs, they thought we were a part of Muslim culture. I told people that we were born Armenians and we are Armenians.

They call us “Armenians from Diaspora,” we always feel that we are strangers. We are in our homeland, but we are strangers.⁹⁰

The faith in Armenia as homeland was central in intention to stay, even while recognizing its precarity:

I am sure we will live here, this is our homeland.

We have moved to our homeland. Our children are growing up here and I do not want to move from one place to another with my children every time. I want to stay here for my children, I want them to remember their mother tongue.

When there was a war in Syria, everybody thought that it is time to move to our homeland. If we have a job and can earn a living, we will not move anywhere. We love our homeland very much and we were dreaming about moving to our fatherland

for years. We are living here for about six years, but I am still getting excited when seeing Ararat Mountain. This is like a dream.⁹¹

Respondents were also conscious that “moving” is central to the Armenian experience and that staying in Armenia as Armenians offered a security, even in precarity:

I think we should stop moving from one place to another. I would like to settle in one place. Yes, I would like to live here and I wish I will not need to go to another place.

Armenians need to live in Armenia. It would be perfect If everything in Armenia was nice and all Armenians would live here. We should do everything to make Armenia a place where everybody would like to move.

When I was living in Syria, I knew that my homeland is Armenia and I felt responsibility for Armenia. I was right because I am here now and I could come to Armenia when I had problems.

I imagine my life here only. Maybe I will move to another country temporarily, but I will be back because a human should have a home and this is my home.

I feel good here. I would like to say thank you to the Armenian doctors who help me a lot. I will live here still.⁹²

As migration/displacement is such a prevalent theme in the public sphere, even while professing their own intentionality to stay, respondents were empathetic of those who had done otherwise:

I think that people should not judge each other, but if there is an opportunity to stay in Armenia, people have to stay, because this is our country. Our grandfathers left the country and we were born in foreign countries, look what happened. We are back again.

I do not know people's attitudes toward those who leave the country, but I do not judge people. They live however they want and however they can.⁹³

CONSTRUCTING HOME IN PRECARIOUS HOMELANDS

Despite professing intentionality to stay in their new homes in Yerevan and seeming quite settled, the loss of Syria as homeland is still a huge wound for many. For some respondents, Syria is the homeland they long for, and Armenia has been a difficult adjustment:

I feel more at home in Syria than in Armenia and I remember when during COVID there was the lockdown and we weren't able to travel and then they opened the borders and when I crossed the border, the Lebanese border to the Syrian one with my luggage, etc. . . . walking because there were no cars allowed . . . when I saw the first Syrian soldier, I started to cry [*laughs*] and he asked why are you crying? And I told him I'm home. So yes, I feel home in Armenia but like Syria is something else for me. I am known there. . . . It's just my home . . . it's not because of my parents (being there) only but because I still feel belonging. I think I was very much integrated with the culture, the system there, so I feel at home there so. . . . But this is also home [*laughs*].⁹⁴

Many respondents shared that they had made concerted efforts to build a sense of home in Armenia and consciously loosen their connections to Syria in order to survive:

Because of the war, we moved and the first year I didn't like Armenia because my mind was there and I was connected to Syria somehow. And then I decided that there was no way to go back there because the war, I don't know when it will stop. . . . So I forced myself to love Armenia. But now I love Armenia. I want to live here not because I am forced.⁹⁵

Being Syrian is a point of pride regardless of how they are perceived in Armenia:

I am proud that I am Syrian and I will tell to everyone that my background's from Syria, I was born in Syria, raised in Syria. . . . I came in my life to this stage because I was Syrian, I made my decisions in a certain way because I was Syrian but the Syria that I know is something different to the Syria today.

Local people tell me that Armenians from Syria are hard-working people, they tell me that they like our dialect and we should not change it, as it sounds very nice. I did not face any discrimination.

Local people love us. They do not like people from Artsakh, but they like Armenians from Syria. They try to help us always.⁹⁶

The tight knit Syrian Armenian community was mentioned by many respondents as a source of security and belonging. But for one or two, the move from a close community to Yerevan has brought some unexpected benefits:

Here I feel more free and more myself than in Syria. Because in Syria, the community will decide what you want, what kind of life you need and everyone is involved in your personal life. But here it's easier, it's freer.

Most respondents said although they had local friends, their closest friends were Syrian Armenians or other diasporan Armenians. This was less the case for younger people who came to Yerevan as children and had integrated into schools and society at a younger age:

If you were just to observe my friend group, we're all Armenians from different parts of the world or even local Armenians, and I feel like just from our friend group one can realize the Armenian experience is so diverse, that it cannot be tied to being a local Armenian and being typical conservative Armenian that everyone knows about. That being Armenian is a wide variety of things.⁹⁷

This was also accompanied by a general preference for working with non-local Armenians as it was "easier":

But when it comes to work, I prefer to work with Armenians that came from abroad . . . it's easy. They make the job easier. It's not about the language . . . nothing against the locals . . . but it's easier. Not that I can't work with the locals but it's easier for me to work with Armenians that came from outside.⁹⁸

This corresponds to the idea that diaspora Armenians are not able to comprehend the style, codes, and “hidden transcripts” that local Armenians (and arguably Russians and other post-Soviet groups) share. This distinction between what some call “mentalities” or sensibilities due to distinct historical paths and experiences can leave one feeling unmoored despite being among “fellow” Armenians. For those who live in diaspora, it is the diasporan infrastructure, socialization, and culture that become home. Nare Galstyan has written on how some Syrian Armenians feel more comfortable moving to another diaspora community (in this case, in the Netherlands) than they do staying in Armenia.⁹⁹ Swapping one diaspora community for another is less of a mental and behavioral upheaval than adjusting to life in Armenia, the “step-homeland.” For some Syrian Armenians, the diaspora is the familiar home and an easier place to be, if given the choice. Despite the destruction of Syria, many Syrian Armenians have also returned to Syria to rebuild their homes and communities, or, as in the case of one of our respondents, are intending to do so. These variations in trajectories suggest that people make decisions to move or stay out of a sense of long-term intentionality, cognizant of choosing a course not just for themselves but for their descendants. Often the intentionality to stay is explained through the theme of collective duty and patriotism, which requires setting aside one's own situation:

I have a sense of duty. Many people are leaving, but we need people to stay and live here. I and my friends are here. We are responsible for our history. Many people died trying to save this small country and we need people, who will live here. Otherwise, why did those people die? Regardless of the economic situation, people should stay in Armenia or at least visit it very often as we did. Due to the genocide, many people were forced to live and grow up in other countries, but we have to know that our homeland is here.¹⁰⁰

I have both responsibility and willingness to do whatever I can for my country. I have many disappointments, but also there are many positive things. We should change whatever is negative and develop everything positive.¹⁰¹

The construction of Armenia as homeland, however precarious, also has a validating effect on the migrants and displaced. This is reflected in the way that they grapple with the label “refugee,” which may indeed describe their situation. Many bristle from and do not accept this term, whether or not they are formally/legally recognized as refugees. This is not an uncommon reaction in comparative cases, particularly by those who have some means and agency, as “refugee” is a loaded term with many connotations and associations that individuals may not wish to identify with. In their rejection or qualified acceptance of the label “refugee,” respondents expressed intentionality:

Some people moved to Europe as refugees, but we are in our homeland and do not feel that we are refugees.

I resent when people from different organizations call me refugee, but I do not tell them about it.

A refugee is a person who was forced to leave his/her home. From this point of view, I am also a refugee.

I was a refugee, but now I perceive myself as a local.

I am not a refugee, as I decided to move to Armenia myself.

I think we are refugees, but we are living here for a long time and that is why we do not perceive ourselves as refugees.¹⁰²

Unsurprisingly, the theme that emerged most strongly in our fieldwork was the war’s impact in rendering Armenia a precarious homeland. Many respondents identified themselves and their future as intertwined with that of the country, and therefore their lives as precarious:

I have my life here. My future will be like the future of my country. We will see, . . . but I worry about the security of my family and friends, as the risk of the war exists always here. Also, the unstable political processes are my concern.

The war in Karabakh, which influences life in Yerevan very much. Almost every day we read that in this or that place there were shootings and people died. The war is going on right now and tomorrow another large-scale war can start.

I share all the same concerns about the future as all the Armenians. We feel unsafe in Armenia.¹⁰³

For the Syrians who fled one war and found refuge in Armenia, the 2020 war and its continuing aftermaths have led to a reevaluation. The fears and precarity extend to the entire population, but for the Syrians it is framed as another blow, requiring reflection and reconfiguration:¹⁰⁴

The main concern about the future is the political and security situation in Armenia. I already saw a war in Syria – the shelling of my city. I don't want to see the same in Yerevan.¹⁰⁵

Interestingly, the broader terrain of precarity did not apply to their everyday lives. All respondents talked about feeling safe and free in terms of their quotient lives in Yerevan, and in contrast to restrictions they have in Syria:

There is more freedom in Yerevan than in Syria. You are free and there are no Islamic traditions. I am not a foreigner here and everybody is Christian.

I am comparing with Aleppo and this is a smaller city, but this is our country and I feel safer here. I walk in the city during the night and do not feel any fear, it is very important.

After the (Syrian) war I think that the first thing that feels like home for me is safety, for me. In Armenia I feel safe. I can walk in the middle of the night alone and never feel the fear that anyone (is) following me or something.¹⁰⁶

This observation may be applied more broadly to the social landscape of Yerevan. Migrants and refugees feel “safe” in their localized spaces, conducting their lives in bubbles among those who share their experience of war and/or displacement and/or migration. Through everyday urban sociabilities, these groups intersect and, in certain forums and times, fuse and merge.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

This article has contributed to the study of Syrian refugees and migrants by focusing on one destination city—Yerevan. While previous studies have looked at the challenges of Armenian refugees and migrants settling in Armenia, the 2020 war and its continuing reverberations, both at the local and the broader geopolitical levels, have added a layer of critical precarity to this particular case. This article has suggested that the war and its protracted aftermath have rendered Armenia a precarious homeland. Such precarity jeopardizes the defining feature of Syrian Armenians—the intentionality to stay in Armenia. This precarity has been further exacerbated by Azerbaijan’s violent takeover of the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 after a nine-month campaign of starvation, resulting in the ethnic cleansing¹⁰⁷ of its native Armenian population.¹⁰⁸

Research in the aftermath of war and continuing precarity is inevitably inconclusive. While qualitatively distinct, the Syrian Armenian experience also has many intersections with the other groups of refugees, migrants, and new arrivals. This article has sought to center Syrian refugee/migrant experiences and narratives within the emerging grassroots cosmopolitanism and urban sociabilities of the Yerevan urban landscape, using the wider framework of the “Global East.” The case of Syrian Armenian migration/displacement to Armenia is disruptive to prevailing linear notions of home, homeland, nation, and diaspora. It challenges us to engage more substantially with the nuances and complexities of multilayered identities reconfigured through war and continuing precarity. This case opens the dynamic intersections between migration studies, refugee studies, and diaspora studies, as experienced and articulated by Syrian Armenians caught between intentionality and precarity in Armenia.

NOTES

¹ My sincere thanks to the organizers and participants of the *New Perspectives on Middle East Migrations* workshop, North Carolina State University, 11-12 July 2022, where this article was first presented.

² Quotes from Focus Group no. 3, conducted in Yerevan on 9 March 2022. Part of the project *Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Sense of Belonging and Intentions to Stay Among Young, Newcomers to Armenia*, British Academy Humanities and Social Sciences Tackling Global Challenges (GCRF) fund, <https://armenianewcomers.stir.ac.uk/>.

³ "People in refugee-like situation refers to a category which is descriptive in nature and includes groups of people who are outside their country or territory of origin and who face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained." UNHCR, "Definition," accessed 1 August 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/definition/>.

⁴ Jessie Williams, "'It is Like a Concentration Camp': The Forgotten Crisis on Europe's Doorstep," *Telegraph*, 16 August 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-blockade/?fbclid=IwAR3rFYLeJ6S-Qjfce-PrF1OVE4orX80B1fHxaUjeuLXo-0mIk97adxpy6YQ>.

⁵ Maria Titizian, "What It Means to Be Methodically Starved," EVN Report, 18 July 2023, https://evnreport.com/opinion/what-it-means-to-be-methodically-starved/?fbclid=IwAR1ztcsFbAIKk3-3F2Z4FNq2fo3Yp_CclPg5gP1yHg0pwxM3aeCGBjiXS0.

⁶ The queues of fleeing Armenians were so substantial that they could be viewed from space. See Azmi Haroun, "The Crowds of Armenians Fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh Are So Big You Can See Them from Space," *Business Insider*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/cowds-of-armenians-fleeing-nagorno-karabakh-are-visible-from-space-2023-9?r=US&IR=T>.

⁷ Only a few dozen people (mostly elderly or infirm) reportedly remained in Nagorno-Karabakh in October 2023. By April 2024, fifty of them had been transferred to Armenia via the ICRC upon their request. "Why are there no Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?" *Freedom House Report*, July 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2024/why-are-there-no-armenians-nagorno-karabakh?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR296JoMHf4H4YQEwCf2wB-Iw1fRqxihvhRRH6aBVFST5i4hQtCseH5Aalw_aem_aRnz5Cf42rLlxP7IsgvNLA.

- ⁸ See, for example, Dale Berning Sawa, "Monumental Loss: Azerbaijan and 'The Worst Cultural Genocide of the 21st Century,'" *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/monumental-loss-azerbaijan-cultural-genocide-khachkars>; Simon Maghakyan, "Emboldened by Ukraine Crisis, Azerbaijan Escalates its War on Armenian Heritage Sites," *Hyperallergic*, 4 February 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/709512/azerbaijan-escalates-its-war-on-armenian-heritage-sites/>; Caucasus Heritage Watch, last updated 2024, <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/>.
- ⁹ See, for example, Tatevik Hayrapetyan, "Aliyev Appears Open to Peace, Yet Prepares for Another Conflict," EVN Report, 29 December 2023, <https://evnreport.com/politics/aliyev-appears-open-to-peace-yet-prepares-for-another-conflict/>.
- ¹⁰ "Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia: Different People with Different Needs", op-ed by The Caucasus Institute, 21 March 2024, CivilNet, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/768720/refugees-from-nagorno-karabakh-in-armenia-different-people-with-different-needs/>.
- ¹¹ Olesya Vartanyan, "Armenia Struggles to Cope with Exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh," International Crisis Group, 4 March 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict-armenia/armenia-struggles-cope-exodus>.
- ¹² The state institutions of Nagorno Karabakh were formally dissolved on January 1, 2024. Laurence Broers, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic: The Life and Death of an Unrecognized State," Eurasianet, 2 January 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/the-nagorno-karabakh-republic-the-life-and-death-of-an-unrecognized-state>.
- ¹³ The number of refugees from Syria was 6.4 million at the end of 2023. UNHCR, *UNHCR Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2023*, 17, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-2023>.
- ¹⁴ "UNHCR is Helping Syrian-Armenians Displaced by the Epidemic," UNHCR Armenia, 2 June 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/am/en/15043-unhcr-is-assisting-syrian-armenians-displaced-by-the-epidemic.html>.
- ¹⁵ Sossie Kasbarian, "Refuge in the 'Homeland': The Syrian Armenians in Armenia," in *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the Present*, eds. Francesca Piana and Joanne Laycock (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 164–80.
- ¹⁶ Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996): 377–404.
- ¹⁷ Sossie Kasbarian, "The Armenian Middle East: Boundaries, Pathways and Horizons," in *The Routledge Handbook on Middle Eastern Diasporas*, eds. Dalia Abdelhady and Ramy Aly (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 414–15.

¹⁸ Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 576–610.

¹⁹ For a discussion about continuities between the genocide, the Syrian civil war, and the Karabakh war, see Arsen Hakobyan and Marcello Mollica, "Encountering Turkish Denialism: From the Syrian Conflict to the Second Karabakh War," *Urbanities* 11, no. 1 (2021): 36–54.

²⁰ Quote from Focus Group no. 4, conducted (in English) in Yerevan in May 2022. Part of the project *Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Sense of Belonging and Intentions to Stay Among Young, Newcomers to Armenia*.

²¹ Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar, "Displacement, Emplacement and Migrant Newcomers: Rethinking Urban Sociabilities within Multiscalar Power," *Identities* 23, no. 1 (2016): 17–34.

²² "Owing to the absence of a direct link to an ancestral homeland, the Republic of Armenia (Hayastan), with whom the western diaspora has no historical physical connection, serves as a substitute for a 'homeland.' Diasporans therefore have to negotiate the gap between a mythical homeland and an actual 'step-homeland' in the shape of the Armenian state. My concept of a 'step-homeland' encapsulates a situation where two entities that are not related by descent are forced into a familial relationship by external forces; that is, it is not a naturally occurring relationship but one that is forged through circumstances. The sense of step-ness also carries with it connotations of difficulty and a need for adjustment by both parties." Sossie Kasbarian, "The Myth and Reality of 'Return': Diaspora in the Homeland," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 359.

²³ Laura Hammond, "Tigranyan Returnee's Notions of Home: Five Variations on a Theme," in *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, eds. Fran Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 21–34.

²⁴ I am borrowing this term from psychology which defines it as "a characteristic of an individual's acts that requires the individual (a) to have goals, desires, and standards; (b) to select behaviors that are in the service of attaining the goal (e.g., means to an end); and (c) to call into conscious awareness a desired future state." American Psychological Association (APA), s.v. "Intentionality," APA Dictionary of Psychology, last updated 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/intentionality>.

²⁵ The project team for *Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Sense of Belonging and Intentions to Stay Among Young, Newcomers to Armenia* is composed of University of Stirling colleagues Dr. Sarah Wilson (Principal Investigator), Dr. Maria Fotopoulou, Dr. Sossie Kasbarian, Dr. Marina Shapira, Scot Hunter; and Yerevan State University colleagues Professor Zinaida Tokmajyan and Professor Maria Zaslavskaya. Marina Galstyan, Arem Mkrtychyan, Gagik Tumanyan, Anahit Hakobyan and others at Yerevan State University also helped with the production of data and welcomed the project team. Please see:

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/humanities-social-sciences-tackling-global-challenges-should-i-stay-or-should-i-go/>.

²⁶ Please see the special issue “Armenian Migration Diasporas in a Rapidly Changing Context” in *Diaspora* 24, no. 2 (forthcoming).

²⁷ Three of the focus groups (on 19 November 2021, 8 March 2021, and 9 March 2022) were conducted (in Armenian) by Maria Zaslavskaya and translated/transcribed by Marina Shapira. The fourth (in May 2022) was conducted (in English) and transcribed by Sarah Wilson, Marina Shapira, and Scot Hunter.

²⁸ These were either conducted by me or together with my colleagues Maria Fotopoulou and/or Scot Hunter (who also transcribed them). In addition, some of the informal conversations I draw upon were conducted together with Marina Shapira (partly in Armenian), Sarah Wilson, Maria Fotopoulou, and Scot Hunter. All interviews used in this article were conducted in English, with some Armenian element.

²⁹ All ethical consents were obtained in accordance with the university’s requirements, see “Research ethics and integrity,” University of Stirling, accessed 1 August 2024, <https://www.stir.ac.uk/research/research-ethics-and-integrity/>.

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³¹ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Introduction: Recentering the South in Studies of Migration,” *Migration and Society: Advances in Research* 3 (2020): 1–18.

³² Renato Rosaldo introduced the term “deep hanging out” in a presentation at the 1994 “Anthropology and ‘the Field’” conference, subsequently discussed by James Clifford in “Anthropology and/as Travel,” *Etnofoor* 9, no. 2 (1996): 5. The concept was popularized further by Clifford Geertz in 1998 in the title of a book review he authored for *The New York Review of Books* to describe immersive fieldwork on an informal level. Geertz, “Deep Hanging Out,” *New York Review*, 22 October 1998, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/?lp_txn_id=1470335.

³³ Kasbarian, “Armenian Middle East,” 414–15.

³⁴ See, for example, Avedis K. Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under the Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); R. Hrair Dekmejian, “The Armenians: History, Consciousness and the Middle Eastern Dispersion,” *Middle East Review* 9, no. 1 (1976): 26–31; Richard G. Hovannisian, “The Ebb and Flow of the Armenian Minority in the Arab Middle East,” *Middle East Journal* 28, no. 1 (1974): 19–32; Simon Payaslian, “Diasporan Subalternities: the Armenian Community in Syria,” *Diaspora* 16, no. 1/2 (2007): 92–132; Hratch Tchilingirian, “Armenian Communities in the Middle East: Losing the Past in the Future?” in *From Pluralism to Extinction? Perspectives and Challenges for Christians in the Middle East*, ed. Sotiris Roussos (London: Transnational Press, 2023): 13–44;

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³⁵ Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 281.

³⁶ Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia*.

³⁷ Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*; Benjamin T. White, "Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920–1939," *Past & Present* 235, no. 1 (May 2017): 141–78; Payaslian, "Diasporan Subalternities."

³⁸ Sanjian, *Armenian Communities in Syria*; Payaslian, "Diasporan Subalternities."

³⁹ Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 280.

⁴⁰ White, "Refugees and the Definition of Syria"; White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); Victoria Abrahamyan, "Citizen Strangers: Identity Labelling and Discourse in the French Mandatory Syria, 1920–1932," *Journal of Migration History* 6, no. 1 (2020): 40–61.

⁴¹ Joanne Laycock and Francesca Piana, eds., *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

⁴² Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia*, 32–4, 89, 148.

⁴³ Migliorino, "Armenian Community and the State"; Payaslian, "Diasporan Subalternities."

⁴⁴ Tchilingirian, "Armenian Communities in the Middle East," 13–44, table 1, *Estimates of Armenian Population in the Middle East*, 39.

⁴⁵ See Ara Sanjian, "Homeland-Diaspora Relations under Khrushchev and Brezhnev: Soviet Embassy Reports from Beirut on the Armenian Community in Lebanon, 1959–1982 (A Preliminary Study)," in *Arméniens et Grecs en diaspora: approches comparatives*, eds. Michel Bruneau, Ioannis Hassiotis, Martine Hovanesian, and Claire Mouradian (Athens: Ecole française d'Athènes, 2007), 273–82; Susan Pattie, "From the Centres to the Periphery: 'Repatriation' to an Armenian Homeland in the Twentieth Century," in *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, eds. Fran Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), 109–24; Jo Laycock, "Armenian

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⁴⁶ Razmik Panossian, "Between Ambivalence and Intrusion: Politics and Identity in Armenia-Diaspora Relations," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 7, no. 2 (1998): 149–96.

⁴⁷ Kasbarian, "Myth and Reality of 'Return.' "

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⁴⁹ Ani Davtyan, "Dilemma of Syrian Armenians: Quandary between Refugees and Repatriates," Noravank Foundation, 20 June 2017, http://www.noravank.am/eng/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=15830.

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⁵³ Kasbarian, "Refuge in the 'Homeland.' "

⁵⁴ Marianna Grigoryan, "The Syrian Refugee Restaurateurs Spicing up Armenian Cuisine," *The Guardian*, 7 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/07/the-syrian-refugee-restaurateurs-spicing-up-armenian-cuisine>.

⁵⁵ Martin Müller, "In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South," *Geopolitics* 25, no. 3 (2020), 737.

⁵⁶ Müller, "In Search of the Global East," 740–41.

⁵⁷ Bedross Der Matossian and Sossie Kasbarian, eds., "Fault Lines and Fractures in the 2020 Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh War: Silences, Absences and Erasures in Middle East Studies," special issue, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 3 (August 2022).

⁵⁸ Aidan Simardone, "The West's Double Standards in the Armenian Crisis," *Jacobin*, 8 August 2023, https://jacobin.com/2023/08/armenian-crisis-western-strategy-double-standards-energy-security?fbclid=IwAR19LzjY-lhiO0Fritza6bEdER1p6l7_YBbKR3Nw5SDreufklvPSNICRHbc.

⁵⁹ Müller, "In Search of the Global East," 736–37.

⁶⁰ Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar, "Displacement, Emplacement and Migrant Newcomers: Rethinking Urban Sociabilities within Multiscalar Power," *Identities* 23, no. 1 (2016): 17–34.

⁶¹ There is a growing Iranian community of migrants in Armenia—both Armenian and non-Armenian Iranians who consider living in a precarious new homeland preferable to living under an oppressive regime. Mehrnoush Cheragh Abadi, "What Iranians Seek in War-Scarred Armenia: Alcohol, Social Freedom, and Maybe a New Life," *Equal Times*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.equaltimes.org/what-iranians-seek-in-war-scarred>.

⁶² Our wider research project also engaged with newcomers' housing and neighborhoods; their sense of being at home and belonging; and their feelings about the city. These lie outside the parameters of this article.

⁶³ Extracts from four focus groups conducted with Syrian Armenians.

⁶⁴ Sasha Raspopina, "Street Illegal: Meet the Artivists Galvanizing Political Protest in Armenia," New East Digital Archive, 15 August 2016, <https://www.new-east-archive.org/articles/show/6557/artak-gevorgyan-street-art-yerevan-armenia>; Aren Melikyan and Maia Shalashvili, "Confronting Structural Violence with Street Art," *Caucasus Edition*, 29 June 2018, part 1: <https://caucasusedition.net/confronting-structural-violence-through-street-art-part-1/>, part 2: <https://caucasusedition.net/confronting-structural-violence-through-street-art-part-2/>.

⁶⁵ Amos Chapple, "Wall Memorials: Armenian Street Murals Honor Fallen Soldiers," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 10 June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-mural-soldiers-war-death-memorial/31891311.html>.

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Maria Fotopoulou for this insight.

⁶⁷ "Soldier in Iconic Photo Killed on Artsakh Frontline," *Asbarez*, 8 October 2020, <https://asbarez.com/soldier-in-iconic-photo-killed-on-artsakh-frontline/>.

⁶⁸ "Yerevan State University Holds Event in Memory of Its Students Killed in 44-Day War," *News.am*, 29 September 2021, <https://news.am/eng/news/665076.html>.

⁶⁹ "Tribute to the Memory of AUA's Fallen Student Soldiers," AUA Newsroom, 31 May 2021 <https://newsroom.aua.am/2021/05/31/tribute-memory-fallen-student-soldiers/>.

⁷⁰ Knar Khudoyan, "The 'Revolution of Millionaires' in Armenia is Turning Increasingly Tense," *Open Democracy*, 1 June 2022,

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/revolution-of-millionaires-armenia-protests-nagorno-karabakh/>.

⁷¹ Anna Ohanyan, “Is Armenia’s Democracy on Borrowed Time?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, website, 11 December 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/11/is-armenia-s-democracy-on-borrowed-time-pub-83438>.

⁷² Ukrainians have more options than Russians and prefer to go to a neighboring European country, but there is still a sizable Ukrainian refugee community here. Vartan Marashlyan, Executive Director of Repat Armenia, interview by Sossie Kasbarian, Maria Fotopoulou and Scot Hunter, May 2022, Yerevan.

⁷³ Victoria Muradyan, “Armenia a Safe Haven for Russians and Ukrainians,” EVN Report, 10 March 2022, <https://evnreport.com/politics/armenia-a-safe-haven-for-russians-and-ukrainians/>.

⁷⁴ Raffi Elliott, “200 Years of Armenia as a Refuge for Russian Emigres,” EVN Report, 20 April 2022, <https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/200-years-of-armenia-as-a-refuge-for-russian-emigres>.

⁷⁵ Yuliana Melkumyan and Nvard Melkonyan, “Immigration of Russian Citizens to Armenia during the Russian-Ukrainian War That Began in 2022: Pull-Push Factors,” *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University* 2, no. 1(4) (2023): 137–47.

⁷⁶ Syuzan Tosunyan, “Armenia: The Silicon Valley of the Soviet Union,” EVN Report, 29 August 2021, <https://evnreport.com/creative-tech/armenia-the-silicon-valley-of-the-soviet-union/>.

⁷⁷ Ksenia Babich, “‘I Have No Fear and No Hope’: Why Russians are Returning to Russia,” *Open Democracy*, 5 July 2023, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-relocation-emigration-return-reasons/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=content_studio&fbclid=IwAR1AarurVq8ddp1WwS31y6Ad_cYKjIrgmimzgIjXSAazxs2RYS7Zd7i3_9Y.

⁷⁸ Maria Gunko, “‘Russian Imperial Gaze’: Reflections from Armenia since the Start of the Russia-Ukraine Military Conflict,” *Political Geography* 99 (2022): 102739.

⁷⁹ This was a common refrain among our interviewees, some of whom had to change their plans and make adaptations. One diasporan consultant who was working on a government project had to cut his visit short and return to the UK due to spiraling rents. Landlords have taken advantage of the Russian influx and are routinely giving their existing tenants notice and replacing them with Russians who are prepared to pay much more.

⁸⁰ Pink Armenia serves the whole LGBTQ community in Armenia and has members from the Indian, Iranian, Russian, and other migrant communities. Despite Armenia not being a safe place to be openly LGBTQ, there is a vibrant community and strides are being made, thanks to the dedication of

groups like Pink Armenia, <https://www.pinkarmenia.org/en/>. Many non-Armenian LGBTQ (and rural Armenians) move to Yerevan where they can be relatively anonymous and live their lives away from their conservative families or oppressive regimes like that in Iran. Mamikon Hovsepyan, Pink Armenia, interview by Sossie Kasbarian and Scot Hunter, May 2022, Yerevan.

⁸¹ Mamikon Hovsepyan, Pink Armenia, interview by Sossie Kasbarian and Scot Hunter, May 2022, Yerevan.

⁸² Radhika Lakshminarayanan and Tigran Yepremyan, "Armenia-India Partnership: Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Implications in the Eurasian Context," *Asia Europe Journal* 21 (2023): 81-100; George Asatryan, "Armenia and India: Shared Values and Threats," EVN Report, October 2022, <https://evnreport.com/magazine-issues/armenia-and-india-shared-values-and-threats/>.

⁸³ Geeta Mohan, "Indian Family in Armenia Converts Restaurant to Free-Meal Centre for Refugees," *India Today*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/indian-family-armenia-restaurant-free-meal-centre-refugees-1730909-2020-10-12>.

⁸⁴ Extracts from Focus Group no. 3.

⁸⁵ Interviews with Lebanese, Iranian, and Russian university students, interviewed by Sossie Kasbarian, Maria Fotopoulou, Sarah Wilson, Marina Shapira and Scot Hunter, May 2022, Yerevan.

⁸⁶ Extract from Focus Group no. 3.

⁸⁷ Kasbarian, "Refuge in the 'Homeland.' "

⁸⁸ Repat Armenia Foundation, "Services and Programs," Repat Armenia, last updated 2024, <https://repatarmenia.org/services-and-programs>.

⁸⁹ Vartan Marashlyan, Executive Director of Repat Armenia, interview by Sossie Kasbarian, Maria Fotopoulou and Scot Hunter. May 2022, Yerevan.

⁹⁰ Extracts from Focus Groups 3 and 4.

⁹¹ Extracts from four focus groups.

⁹² Extracts from four focus groups.

⁹³ Extracts from Focus Group No. 2.

⁹⁴ Extract from Focus Group No. 4.

⁹⁵ Extract from Focus Group No. 4.

⁹⁶ Extracts from four focus groups.

⁹⁷ Interview with university student, conducted by Sossie Kasbarian and Scot Hunter, May 2022

⁹⁸ Extract from Focus Group no. 4.

⁹⁹ Nare Galstyan, "Diaspora-Homeland Relations Re-examined: The Case of Syrian Armenian in the Netherlands," in *The Armenian Diaspora and Stateless Power: Collective Identity in the Transnational 20th Century*, eds. Talar

Chahinian, Sossie Kasbarian, and Tsolin Nalbantian, *Armenians in the Modern and Early Modern World* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2024), chap. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Extract from Focus Group No. 2.

¹⁰¹ Extract from Focus Group no. 1.

¹⁰² Extracts from four focus groups.

¹⁰³ Extracts from four focus groups.

¹⁰⁴ See also Tom Mutch, "The Syrian Armenians Who Fled One War Zone For Another," *New Lines Magazine*, 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-syrian-armenians-who-fled-one-war-zone-for-another/>.

¹⁰⁵ Extract from Focus Group no. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Extracts from four focus groups.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Lucy Martirosyan and Siranush Sargsyan, "Business as Usual for EU and Azerbaijan amid Nagorno-Karabakh 'Ethnic Cleansing,'" *Open Democracy*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/eu-armenia-refugee-war-azerbaijan-gas-energy-russia-security-rights/>; and "Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan's Energy Wealth Gives It De Facto Impunity for Ethnic Cleansing," *The Conversation*, 6 October 2023, <https://theconversation.com/nagorno-karabakh-azerbajians-energy-wealth-gives-it-de-facto-impunity-for-ethnic-cleansing-214910>.

¹⁰⁸ It should be stressed that Armenia's borders continue to be threatened by Azerbaijan almost on a daily basis. This is the news at the time of writing: "Azerbaijani Forces Open Fire on Armenian Positions in the Tavush & Gegharkunik Provinces, No Casualties Reported," *Zartonk*, 5 April 2024, <https://zartonkmedia.com/2024/04/05/azerbajiani-forces-open-fire-on-armenian-positions-in-the-tavush-gegharkunik-provinces-no-casualties-reported/>.