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*Armenians in Egypt*

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## **Abstract**

Armenians in Egypt are a minority. They have their own language, schools, churches, and social institutions. Armenian Egyptians are highly educated. Noticeably, the number of Armenians in Egypt is decreasing due to migration to the West and a weak return migration stream to Armenia. A rough estimate of Armenians in Egypt is 6000; most of them reside in Cairo (the capital) and Alexandria (the second largest urban governorate). This paper explores the lives of Armenian Egyptians and their migration to Egypt before and after the Armenian Genocide in 1915, and their migration from Egypt to the West in the second half of the twentieth century.

## **1. Armenian Diaspora**

The Armenian Diaspora is a term used to describe the communities of Armenians living outside of Armenia. There are large Armenian communities in the United States, Russia, Europe, Middle East, Australia, and South America, and together they comprise the Armenian Diaspora. The growth of diaspora was significantly influenced by the events at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Ottoman Empire known as the 1915 Armenian Genocide (Astourian, 1990; Al-Imam, 2003). Although accurate statistics are not available, the Armenian diaspora is about equally divided between the 1.5 million Armenians in the other republics of the former Soviet Union and a similar number in the rest of the world.

This paper explores Armenian Egyptians' lives and demography before and after the Armenian Genocide as a base for future work to document the lives of Armenians in

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Egypt before they disappear since their numbers are shapely decreasing due to migration to the West. Armenians in Egypt decreased from 40 thousands in the mid fifties of the last century to six thousand nowadays. Documenting the lives of Armenians in Egypt is an important research need.

## **2. Armenian Migration to Egypt**

One should distinguish between two phases of Armenian migration; (1) the pre Armenian Genocide migration which is considered as a sort of voluntary migration within the Ottoman Empire and to other countries in Europe and elsewhere, and (2) the post Armenian Genocide migration which is considered a sort of forced migration associated with a great propensity of hazards and uncertainty. Egypt, with its strong Armenian community, was the guiding head of the Armenians in the Arab world until the mid-twentieth century.

### ***2.1 Before the Armenian Genocide: the voluntary migration***

For a long period of time, Armenia and Egypt were under the role of one controlling body such as Persia, Rome, and the Ottoman Empire. This made it easy for people to move between the two countries without any political constraints. In the recent history, the Armenian migration to Egypt started in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reign of Mohamed Ali (1805 – 1849) witnessed strong migration streams of Armenians to Egypt. Mohamed Ali hired a lot of Armenians to help his government since they were more knowledgeable and better educated than Egyptians at that time. The era of Mohamed Ali witnessed building Armenian churches in Egypt; one for the Armenian Orthodox and another one for the Armenian Catholics. Boghos Youssufian (1768-1844) was an Armenian banker and businessman who in 1819 was in charge of the *Diwan Al-Tijara* (bureau of commerce) besides overseeing other financial affairs for Mohamed Ali. In 1876 the Armenian Nubar Nubarian (1825-1899) the first Prime Minister in modern Egypt. The total number of Armenians in Egypt the 1917 was 12,854 inhabitants.

### ***2.2 After the Armenian Genocide: the forced migration***

A landmark of the Armenian migration is the “Armenian Genocide” which started in 24 April 1915. The Armenian communities in Egypt received a large percentage of the refugees and survivors of the massacres and genocide. They increased the

numbers of the Armenians in Egypt to reach its peak in 1927 census data where their total number was 17,188 inhabitants most of them were concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria (Al-Imam, 1999 and 2003). However, Armenians in Egypt managed to cope with their new lives in Egypt to the extent that Egypt, with its strong Armenian community, was the guiding head of the Armenians in the Arab world until the mid-twentieth century. After the 1952 Nasser's revolution and the socialist tendency of this revolution and given the fact that most of the Egyptian Armenians at that time were working in the private sector as self-employers in most cases, a reverse migration stream was observed among them where they started to migrate to the West, mainly to Europe, the United States, and Australia.

### **3. Demography of Armenians in Egypt**

Armenian Egyptians are concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria. However, they are decreasing due to emigration. They migrate to the West supported by a strong migration network and pushed by economic malfunctioning in Egypt.

#### ***3.1 Trends in Armenian population***

The influxes of Armenian refugees escaping Genocide increased the numbers of the Armenians in Egypt to reach its peak in 1927 census data where their total number was 17,188 inhabitants most of them were concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria (Al-Imam, 1999 and 2003). Some other independent estimates push the number of Armenians in Egypt to 40 thousand inhabitants before 1952. Around 1950, more than 50 percent of Armenians were concentrated in the crowded zones in the heart of the capital nearby their churches, schools, clubs, and markets. The zones of Bein El-sourain and Darb El-Guenena were considered Armenian zones in the first half of the twenties century. In the second half of the twentieth century, Armenians started to move to reside in Cairo suburbs such as Heleopolis, Nozha, Maadi, and Helwan. Nowadays, Heliopolis is considered the recent base of Armenians in Cairo.

The political changes in Egypt following the Egyptian revolution led by Nasser in 1952 and the economic policies of Egyptian government after 1956, forced the emigration of many Armenian Egyptians to Europe, Australia, and the United States. At present there are only some 6000 Armenians left in Egypt, primarily in Cairo.

Despite the decline of its Armenian community, Egypt remains an important and active Armenian cultural center in the Middle East.

### ***3.2 Geography of Armenian population***

Around 1950, more than 50 percent of Armenians were concentrated in the crowded zones in the heart of the capital nearby their churches, schools, clubs, and markets. The zones of Bein El-sourain and Darb El-Guenena were considered Armenian zones in the first half of the twentieth century. In the second half of the twentieth century, Armenians started to move to reside in Cairo suburbs such as Heliopolis, Nozha, Maadi, and Helwan. Nowadays, Heliopolis is considered the recent base of Armenians in Cairo (Kapoian-Kouymjian, 1988).

## **4. Integration, Culture, and Networking**

Like any minority, and pushed with fear of full integration and dissolution in the society, Armenian Egyptians keep their contributions to human civilization alive in their collective memory, passing down stories to each new generation (Habib, 2002). Today structures like clubs, schools, and sports facilities to reinforce communications among Armenian Egyptians and revive the heritage of their forefathers. The Armenian Church and the apolitical structure of the Armenian community have a very important role in unifying Armenians in Egypt. Unlike Armenian minorities in Syria and Lebanon, Armenian Egyptians stay out of local politics.

### ***4.1 Armenians in the labor market***

In the countries of destination, Armenians have gained a reputation for their skill in crafts and in business. In Egypt, Armenian Egyptians work in the private sector, as successful business men, skilled handicraftsmen (especially as jewelers), and dentists (in the past). Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Armenians came/fled to Egypt with a range of skills in the field of business, commerce, and finance. In addition they came to Egypt mastering foreign languages. Nowadays, Armenians who master foreign languages work in offices and branches of international organizations as well as foreign embassies in Cairo.

### ***4.2 Culture and Social networking***

The Armenian community has many venues that strengthen social networking. The community operates two benevolent; the Armenian Red Cross Association, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, and one cultural associations; the Houssaper Cultural Association. The community has four social clubs in Cairo and two in Alexandria, in addition to three sporting clubs in the capital and two in Alexandria. There is one home for the elderly, and many activities for young people, including a dance troupe, Zankezour, a choir, Zevartnots, and a child's choir, Dzaghgasdan (Hassan, 1999).

Armenian artists have their significant contribution to the Egyptian art, music, and cinema industry. The Egyptian Armenian Ohan Hagob Justinian (1913-2001) was the first manufacturer of cameras for cinema production and preparation of Cinema studios in Cairo and Alexandria and he was the camera man of 12 Egyptian movies between 1948 and 1957 (Al-Imam, 2003). Among the well-known and popular movie stars and actresses come Fayrouz (Bayrouz Artin Kalfaian), her sister Nelly, Lebleba (Nonia Kobelian), and Mimi Gamal (Mary Nizar Julian). In the field of Music, Foad Al-Zahery (Foad Grabit Panosian) was one of the most famous Egyptian composers and musician. He composed the Shadow music of 350 Egyptian movies. Anoushka is a well-known Armenian Egyptian Singer. However, it is very important to mention here that a great proportion of Egyptians don't know the Armenian origin of these artists.

#### ***4.3 Language and education***

The first Armenian school in Egypt, the Yeghiazarian Religious School, was established in 1828 at Bein Al-Sourein. In 1854, the school was moved to Darb Al- Geneina and the name was changed to Khorenian, after the Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi. In 1904, Boghos Nubar, an Armenian Legend, moved the Khorenian School to Boulaq. In 1907, he founded the Kalousdian Varjaran Armenian School and kindergarten. Today, only one building and a playground remain on Galaa Street (downtown Cairo). The second Armenian school in Egypt was founded in 1890 by Boghos Youssefian in Alexandria. The newest Armenian school is Nubarian in Heliopolis. This school was founded in 1925 with a donation from Boghos Nubar. The three Armenian schools in Egypt eventually integrate a K-12 program. Armenian

schools in Egypt are partially supported by the Prelacy of the Armenian Church in Egypt.

Armenian education is very important in maintaining Armenian language among the Armenian community in Egypt. In Addition, Armenian language is the only language that Armenians use within their families and communities.

#### ***4.4 Journalism***

Armenian newspapers in Egypt are among the longest continuously-publishing newspapers in the Armenian Diaspora. The first Armenian periodical in Egypt, *Armaveni* (Date Palm), was published in Cairo by Abraham Mouradian in 1865. He was also the first Armenian editor of Egypt. *Neghos* (Nile), published by Ghevond Papazian, appeared in 1889 in Alexandria. Today, in Egypt, there are two daily papers and one weekly publication, all affiliated to Armenian political parties. *Houssaper*, a daily belonging to the Tashnag Party, was founded in 1913. The *Housaper Building* (in downtown Cairo) was once one of the main focal points of Armenian life in Cairo. *Arev*, also a daily, put out by the Ramgavar Party, was founded in 1915, while the weekly *Tchahagir*, founded in 1948 belongs to the Hentchag Party (Hassan, 1999). The main problem faces Armenian newspapers in Egypt is the declining readership.

One may justifiably ask, are there any contributions made by Egyptian Armenians to non-Armenian journalism in Egypt? Except for the very famous caricaturist Alexander Saroukhan (1898-1977), the contribution of Armenian Egyptians to non-Armenian journalism in Egypt is nil.

#### ***4.5 Armenian Church***

Armenian Egyptians are divided into Orthodox (Gregorians) and Catholics. Catholics comprise the majority of Armenian Egyptians. There are five Armenian churches in Egypt, one in Alexandria and four in Cairo:

- Armenian Catholic Patriarchate (Alexandria)
- St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church (Cairo)
- Armenian Catholic Patriarchate and the Church of the Assumption (Cairo)
- Sourp Krikor Lousavoritch Armenian Apostolic Church (Cairo)

- Ste. Therese Armenian Catholic Church (Heliopolis, Cairo)

The Prelacy of the Armenian Church in Egypt, which is under the jurisdiction of Holy Etchmiadzin, is the primary guardian of community assets such as endowments, real estate in the form of agricultural land and other property bequeathed by generations of philanthropists.

### **5. Migration to the West**

A reverse migration, not to the origin but to the West was observed among Armenian Egyptians starting from 1956 after the introduction of “what is called the “Socialist Laws” and the nationalization of many basic economic firms under the Nasser regime. Since Armenian Egyptian at that time were working in the private sector and monopolizing basic professions and trade markets, the socialist laws affected them more than those who work in the governmental sector or in Agriculture. Many migrants realized – mistakenly or correctly – that they are threatened by these new tendency and many left the country and migrated to the West. Since 1956 the total number of Armenian Egyptians is decreasing. Accurate figures of leavers and slayers are not available since questions on ethnicity were not included in the censuses after the 1952 revolution.

### **6. The Future of Armenians in Egypt**

Most of current Armenian Egyptians who are permanent residents of Egypt were born in Egypt. Armenia to them are folkloric stories and cultural practices that they each generation hands them to the successor generation. Armenian Egyptians are full Egyptians with an extra cultural layer. Egyptians are Pharaohs, Copts, Christians, Muslims, Arabs, Africans, and Middle Easterns. Armenian Egyptians are all of this plus Armenians. However, given the well-established Armenian Egyptians networks in Europe, Canada, USA, and Australia as pull factors and the economic difficulties in Egypt as push factors put Armenian Egyptians more likely than any other Egyptian to migrate to the West. A research project that aims at capturing and documenting the lives of Armenians; their culture, networks, livelihood strategies, before they disappear is an instant research need.

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