MALOYAN'S WILL:
ARMENO-SYRIAN SOLACE IN ARABIC

ADRIEN ZAKAR
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

For Zakiyeh

Armenians and other Christians drawn up to receive a party at Mardin station 1918 or 1919. McCoy Collection, Library of Congress.

In the spring of 1915, Aghnatios Shukrallah Maloyan sensed an unsettling presence creeping into his Upper Mesopotamian hometown perched above a vast, green, endless plain. With each passing day, the construction of the Baghdad Railway down

below progressed at a distance while the air swirling up through the stone alleys of Mardin grew more suffocating. As the local Armenian Catholic Archbishop, Maloyan had recently received formal honors by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet V, in the form of an imperial firman—a glittering symbol of loyalty and service that set an ironic prelude to the coming ordeal. For the old streets of the eagle's nest of Mardin kept on growing more tense, filled with odd incidents, phony accolades, strange assassinations, delusional accusations and, above all, whispers of massacres raging in the neighboring provinces.

And then, the blow fell: state officials and the local notability organized the arrest of around four hundred Christian male laymen and clergy, including Maloyan himself. In his final days of freedom, Maloyan confided in his young colleague and old friend, the Syriac Catholic Bishop Gabriel ʿAbdul Ahad Tappouni. He walked to the convent of Saint Ephrem, the seat of Tappouni's ecclesiastical authority, and placed an envelope in his hands, a will sealed within. Maloyan handed this formal document as if he was sensing the start of an encroaching storm and stated: "I think it is the last time I see you." A deep sorrow seized the hearts of those gathered, tears slipping quietly down their cheeks.[1]

Written in Arabic, Maloyan's will reads: "The present circumstances compel me to provide for the means required for the proper administration of the diocese and to prevent any possible misfortune. We are surrounded by waves swelling and winds blowing from all directions, and even our unfortunate and tossed-about lives find themselves under threat."[2] In the coming months and years, indeed, most members of Maloyan and Tappouni's communities would either be killed, displaced into death convoys, abducted, or expelled. The eye-witness testimonies of survivors and fugitives were gathered in the printed Arabic collection: The Utmost Disasters of Christians (*al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt al-Naṣarā*) assembled by the Syriac Catholic priest, scholar, and witness Ishaq Saʿid Armaleh upon his escape to Beirut in 1919. Armaleh's disaster (*nakba*) narrative began with a chronicle of dynastic and ecclesiastical history, spanning from antiquity all the way to the not-so-distant outbreak of violence of 1895, known as the Hamidian massacres. It then transitioned to the tragedies of 1915 through a chronologically orchestrated cacophony of local testimonies of the "nefarious events, injustices, abductions, deportations, massacres, exoduses, injuries and other hideous acts,"[3] as the subtitle summarized it. This text was originally a collection of notes and testimonies written in Arabic Garshuni—Arabic rendered in the Syriac script—intended to evade confiscation by the Ottoman authorities.[4]

---

[1] al-Ab Isḥāq Armaleh, *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt al-Naṣarā* (Jbeil: Dār wa Maktabat Biblos, 2011), 144–5 & 161–2; initially published by the Beirut-based Imprimerie Catholique in 1919.

[2] S. B. Nersès Bédros XIX & Naji Naaman (eds.), *Ignace Maloyan: L'Homme, le Martyr et le Bienheureux* (Bzommar: Couvent N.D. de Bzommar, 2001), 75.

[3] Armaleh, *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt*, title page.

[4] Other accounts include the collection by the Syrian Orthodox student in Dayr az-Zaʿfarān ʿAbed Mshiho Nemān of Qarabāsh, by French Dominicans Jacques Rhétoré and Hyacinthe Simon, and those assembled later by the Franciscan Mansur Mistrih, see: Abed Mshiho Neman of Qarabash, *Sayfo: An Account of the*

Maloyan's will from 1915 and Armaleh's disaster narrative from 1919 have something in common. Written in the Arabic language, they share the very form of articulation between native Armenians, Syrian Christians, and Chaldeans that would help them face the painful memories of 1915 and find solace in their wake. On the northern fringe of the Arabic-speaking world, these communities coexisted with Kurdish notable circles and constituencies, Arab pastoralist confederations, as well as Chechen and Circassian refugee communities that had been settled by the state in strategic locations throughout the 19th-century. For Armenians and Syrian Christians living in this layered and moving landscape, a strategy of survival, affiliation, and solidarity had already been established since at least the 18th-century, which consisted in two main moves.

The first was conversion to Catholicism, which enabled not only the formation of trans-confessional trade networks between Aleppo, Mardin, Diyarbakir, and Mosul but also the circulation and cross-pollination of knowledge among monasteries and libraries in neighboring Mount Lebanon as well as Vienna and Venice. The second move was the adoption of the Arabic language as a daily medium of interpersonal communication, knowledge production, and poetic aurality deploying a distinctive Mardin vernacular. Developed through the centuries, the traditions framing this double-sided strategy, at once confessional and linguistic, were central to the afterlives of Mardin Arabic cultures in the wake of their destruction by the state.

In this essay, I examine how Armeno-Syrian solace—understood as a vernacular form of survival, entwining linguistic intimacy with historical consciousness—materialized in disaster narratives and proverb collections in Arabic. These efforts preserved and sustained a memory of coexistence and violence as well as the popular wisdoms of a world shattered by genocide and the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a world that inevitably disappeared as survivors, dispersed across the globe, adopted new vernaculars and languages. While documenting an ending, the Arabic-speaking scholars born out of the knowledge institutions of Armeno-Syrian solace contributed to the crystallization of idioms and narrative forms to frame political catastrophes that were subsequently embraced and elaborated by other Arab intellectuals and activists in the 20th-century.

Assyrian Genocide, trans. Michael Abdallah and Łukasz Kiczko (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Jacques Rhétoré, *Les chrétiens aux bêtes: souvenirs de la guerre sainte proclamée par les Turcs contre les chrétiens* (Paris: Cerf, 2005); Hyacinthe Simon, *Mardine : la ville heroique: autel et tombeau de l'Arménie (Asie Mineure) durant les massacres de 1915* (Jounieh: Maison Naaman pour la Culture, 1991); P. V. M., "Documents sur les évènements de Mardine (1915–20)" *SOC Collectanea* 29–30 (1996–1997): 5–520. For historical interpretations, see: Khalid S. Dinno, *The Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis then Revival* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), 221–256; Hrant Dink Foundation, *Mardin Tebliğleri: Mardin ve Çevresi Toplumsal ve Ekonomik Tarihi Konferansı* (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Vakfı 2013); David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); Hilmar Kaiser, *The Extermination of Armenians in the Diarbekir Region* (Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2014); Yves Ternon, *Mardin 1915: anatomie pathologique d'une Destruction* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002); Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90–92.

ARABIC PASTS

الله يكفيك شرّ من أحسنت إليه

May God protect you from the harm of those to whom you have done good

Nourri un corbeau il te crèvera l'oeil
Feed a raven, and it will peck out your eye[5]

As he documented the destruction of Maloyan's world, Armaleh used Arabic because a large segment of native Armenian, Syrian Christian, and Chaldean communities in Mardin were both Catholic and born-Arabic speakers. Armaleh's friend and colleague who would later print the collection in Beirut, the Chaldean Jesuit scholar Louis Rizqallah Cheikho, noticed this linguistic idiosyncrasy as he travelled to Mardin after twenty years of absence. He visited his family and the packed libraries of local Christian households and churches to furnish the research institution he was building in Beirut. Returning from Mount Lebanon where he, like Maloyan and Armaleh, had pursued seminary training, Cheikho rediscovered a complex cultural landscape, one that was increasingly anachronistic and yet evermore necessary with the rise of narrow visions of mono-lingual nation-states at the turn of the 20th-century.[6]

Cheikho and Armaleh's paths, though separated by two decades, unfolded along strikingly parallel trajectories. Their shared beginnings in Mardin, intellectual training within Catholic institutions, and commitment to preserving the cultural and literary heritage of native Christians forged not only a lasting friendship, but also an intellectual community that shaped the composition of *al-Quṣarā fī Nakabāt*—a work that remains both deeply rooted in the realities of Mardin and remarkable for its literary sophistication.

Louis Cheikho's life was one of devotion, scholarship, and cultural preservation set against the twilight of the Ottoman Empire. Born in Mardin in 1859, he embarked on an intellectual and spiritual journey that would shape the study of Arabic literature.[7] In 1868, he joined his brother at the Jesuit Seminary in Ghazir, Lebanon, and in 1874, he entered the Jesuit Order, beginning his novitiate in Lons-le-Saunier, France. It was there that he adopted the name "Louis" in homage to Saint Louis Gonzaga, marking the start of a life dedicated to faith and erudition. Returning to Lebanon in 1878, he spent a decade teaching Arabic literature in Beirut. His scholarly ambitions took form in 1882 when he began publishing critical editions of Ara-

[5] al-Ab Yūsef Qūshāqjī, *al-Amthāl al-Shaʿbiyah al- Ḥalabiyah wa Amthāl Mardin*, vol 1 (Aleppo: Maṭbaʿat al-Aḥsān, 1985), 172–3. The Arabic spelling and its French equivalent are by Qūshāqjī, English translations are the author's.

[6] Louis Cheikho "Une Excursion en Mésopotamie," *Études* 69 (1896): 328–348.

[7] On Cheikho's biography, see: Robert Bell Campbell, "The Arabic Journal, Al-Mashriq: Its Beginnings and First Twenty-Five Years Under the Editorship of Père Louis Cheikho, S.J" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1972); Nora K. Schmid, "Louis Cheikho and the Christianization of Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Ascetic Poetry," *Philological Encounters* 6, no. 3–4 (2021): 339–373.

bic literary works, underlining the profound contributions of Arabic-speaking Christian natives. Seeking to refine his theological and academic training, he traveled to Great Britain in 1888 and was ordained by the Chaldean Church of the East in 1891. Further studies in Austria and Paris honed his methodologies before he returned to Beirut in 1894 to resume his academic career at Saint Joseph University.

At Saint Joseph, Cheikho devoted himself to the edition of Eastern Christian texts and Arabic manuscripts, particularly from the pre-Islamic and medieval periods. In 1898, following a visit to his native Mardin, he founded *al-Mashriq*, a journal that became a touchstone of intellectual life in the region. His contributions to its pages were vast, ranging from historical analyses to literary and philological studies. In 1900, he published a seminal series on Catholicism in Mardin, supplemented with manuscript fragments from local monasteries, including the Syriac Catholic Monastery of Saint Moses the Abyssinian (*Deīr Mār Mūsā al-Ḥabashī*) in an-Nabek, Syria.[8] These works became invaluable historical records, preserving traces of a community that, in the years to come, would face near-total destruction. As the specter of violence engulfed his homeland, Cheikho remained in Beirut, tormented by the reports reaching him from Mardin. His letters to his nephew Raphaël Cheikho, who narrowly escaped the massacres by seeking refuge at the Monastery of Saint Moses in April 1915, betray a profound distress, a sense of helplessness and hopeful denial in the face of catastrophe.[9] His correspondence also tied him to Armaleh.[10]

Born in 1879, Armaleh's early years were marked by an unrelenting commitment to Syriac scholarship.[11] He entered the Syriac Catholic Monastery of Sharfeh in Mount Lebanon at the age of sixteen. Recognizing his linguistic talent, Patriarch Aghnatios Ephrem II Rahmani entrusted him with transcribing texts while still a student. After his ordination in 1903, he became the patriarch's secretary and accompanied him on journeys across Rome, Istanbul, Beirut, Aleppo, Urfa, and Diyarbakir. In 1911, he was appointed a teacher at the Monastery of Saint Ephrem in Mardin, and in 1912, he undertook a journey through the Tur ʿAbdin region, later publishing an account of his expedition in *al-Mashriq*.[12]

---

[8] Louis Cheikhō, "al-Katolika fī Mardīn" *al-Mashriq* 12, no. 8–11 (1909): 589–604, 665–673, 732–748, 835–845; Louis Cheikho, "Catalogue raisonné des manuscrits historiques de la Bibliothèque Orientale de l'Université St Joseph," *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale* VI (1913): 229–232.

[9] Lettres de Cheikho à son neveu Raphaël, 1915–1927, Archive of the Society of Jesus, Province de Lyon, Beirut, 7.B.1.

[10] Lettres de Cheikho au P. Ishac Armalet, 1915–1927, Archive of the Society of Jesus, Province de Lyon, Beirut, 7.B.15.

[11] On Armaleh's biography, see: George Anton Kiraz, "Armalah, Isḥāq." in Sebastian P. Brock et al. (eds.), *The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 33; Leon ʿAbd al-Ṣamad, "al-Khurfusqufus Isḥāq Armalah (+1954)," Archbishopric of the Syriac Catholic Church in Aleppo. Archived April 24, 2012. Accessed February 8th, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20120424104605/http:/www.syrcata.org/index.php?module=subjects&func=listpages&subid=221.

[12] al-Qaīs Isḥāq Armaleh, "Siyāḥa fī Ṭūr ʿAbdīn" *al-Mashriq* 16, no. 8–11 (1913): 521–77, 662–75, 731–53, 835–53.

Yet, as Ottoman repression deepened, his scholarly pursuits were violently interrupted. In 1914, he was imprisoned for a short time alongside the head of Saint Ephrem and its entire clergy. The precariousness of Christian existence in the empire's final years had now become an undeniable reality. Despite the devastation, Armaleh's scholarly mission endured. After the catastrophe of 1915, he took refuge in the Monastery of Sharfeh where he had initially received training and catalogued its manuscripts, ensuring the survival of texts that might otherwise have been lost. A prolific contributor to *al-Mashriq*, *al-Bashīr*, and *al-Athār al-Sharqiya*—the latter of which he edited from 1926 until its cessation—he also transcribed nearly four thousand pages of Syriac manuscripts, as well as approximately fifty Arabic books. Many of the manuscripts he painstakingly copied remain preserved in Sharfeh, silent witnesses to his life's work and to the steadfast resilience of an intellectual tradition that refused to vanish.

Armaleh's 1919 disaster narrative follows a structure that reflected the reverberations of centuries-old networks of knowledge production among diverse Arabic-speakers. It abided by a social scientific standard of history writing that was embraced in the late 19th-century by various monasteries and libraries in and around Mount Lebanon as well as among institutions of learning in Damascus, particularly the Arab Academy of Language headed by Muhmmad Kurd Ali. While denouncing sectarian violence, texts like Armaleh's *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt* deployed an "ecumenical frame" made out of "eclectic Ottoman, European, and Arab materials," breathing life into a lexicon and narrative structure—introducing new terms and storylines—that rendered catastrophe intelligible to "many people of the region who belonged to different religious communities."[13] The dynastic and ecclesiastical narrative followed by chronologically arranged eye-witness accounts facilitated a reading practice and way of understanding that embodied the sedimentations of generations of movement among Mardin young priests to the Syrian and Armenian Catholic Monasteries of Sharfeh and Bzommar. By 1915, Cheikho was becoming "one of the greatest scholars of Arab history and literature."[14] He could always be seen at Saint Joseph's dining room proofreading his last article, volume, or recension. His work as editor of the review *al-Mashriq* and with the Beirut-based Catholic Press facilitated the publication of Armaleh's *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt* materially in 1919, while the scholarly tradition it articulated framed its content conceptually.

This narrative situated the main crime scene of Mardin amidst a thickly populated network of surrounding villages such as Benābil, Manşūriyeh, Qalʿat Mara, Qṣur and Tell Armen, anchoring their story in a deep ancient and ecclesiastical past. It then brought the readers' attention to a chronicle written by the Syriac Catholic notable Habib Jarweh in 1895—a hand-written manuscript found at the Monastery of Sharfeh. In Mardin, Muslim notables got together to protect the city's Armenians, Syrian Christians and Chaldeans from further encroachment as poorly clad families started flooding the city from the ravaged plain below. As a prologue to 1915, the

---

[13] Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 7.

[14] Qūshāqjī, *al-Amthāl al-Shaʿbiyah*, vol 2, 651.

historical background and first set of *nakba* narratives, constituting part one, documented the fate of distinct urban and rural communities, retelling their stories based on the testimonies of local men and women. In parts two to five of *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt*, Armaleh turns this initial frame to structure his account of the 1915 massacres, merging eye-witness accounts with priestly reflections, critical analyses, scholarly references, and direct observations transmitting news on and about survivors and their lost ones.[15]

A poetic of disaster wove together complex religious and linguistic references through invocations of *wayl*, *muṣiba*, or *nakba*, which expressed different shades of catastrophe, while making clear hints at trials of the past. These included the Roman persecutions of early Christianity such as the story of the *Forty Martyrs of Sebastia* in the 4th-century and of *Santa Barbara* in the 9th-century. Mardin narratives registered old Arab and Byzantine modes of narration akin to the *Romance of ʿAntar* in the 7th-century and *Digenis Akritas* in the 12th-century. In 1915, these old tales helped Armaleh make sense of the first convoy that would take Maloyan away, which he framed as the massacre of the "four hundred and seventeen martyrs."[16] Armaleh echoed ancient practices by transcribing the lyrics of a mourning tradition known as funeral oration (*rithā'*); a turn to Jeremiah and to the Book of Lamentation amidst the pains of loss, telling the story of eradication while naming its protagonists and mechanisms in vernacular terms.[17] At the wording of Maloyan's will, contemporary monks in Bzommar remark: wouldn't it be believable as a copy of a letter from an ancient bishop martyr? What firmness, what calm, and what pride altogether…"[18]

But ancient persecutions were not the only references that framed Armaleh's disaster narrative. There was also the concept of *nakba*, which etymologically referred to a shift in the usual directions of wind, an image that opened Maloyan's will.[19] *Nakba* also referred to a poetic and literary tradition born out of the famed downfall of the Baramkids in the in 9th-century, known as *Nakbat al-Barāmika*.[20] This Persian clan of Buddhist descent had served as advisors and financiers to the Abbasid Caliphate for decades. However, its members faced a sudden and severe ordeal, leading to their elimination and dispersal. Other references helped grasp such great ironies, which found expressions in invocations of the story of ʿAntar, or ʿAntarah ibn Shaddad, a pre-Islamic Arab hero and poet whose romance or *sīrah* provided references to make sense of what happened after Maloyan's departure and the first two convoys of men. This 6th-century epic staged the resilience of the son of an Arab

[15] Anchoring the story of 1915 in an older set of disasters excavated in Sharfeh and envisioning the present as necessarily requiring the acknowledgment of these older calamities shaped Armaleh's narrative as much as that of his friendʿAbed Mshiḥo Nemān of Qarabāsh who found the manuscript of Fr. Laḥdo from 1895 in the library of Dayr az-Zaʿfarān, who resonantly framed his account of Sayfo; Nemān of Qarabāsh, *Sayfo*, xvi.

[16] Armaleh, *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt*, 184–6.

[17] Ibid., 184–6.

[18] Ibid., 326–31.

[19] Butros al-Bustani, *Muḥit al-Muḥit* (Beirut, 1869–70), 2124–5.

[20] See for example, Jurjī Zaydān, *al-ʿAbbāsā Ukht al-Rashīd aw Nakbāt al-Barāmika* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilal, 1906).

notable and an Ethiopian slave, providing key reflections for the present that drew on a deeply rooted Arab tradition speaking the language of chivalry, honor, and perseverance against prejudice.

The ironic fate of the Baramkids and the resolve of ʿAntarah resonated with the challenges faced by Armaleh's community. Mardin was considered an outstanding model of coexistence staging strong ties, cultural affinities, and shared business ventures among the people of all faiths who eagerly anticipated the arrival of the Baghdad Railway—an immense undertaking built with German expertise and engineering. The prosperity it promised would open new opportunities by drawing on an already established infrastructure of warehouses, granaries, shops, and villages, including the fast-growing village of Tell Armen near the anticipated Mardin station. Neighboring localities such as Qṣur provided a dense system of Armenian, Syrian Christian, and Kurdish villages that would bolster an economic miracle in Upper Mesopotamia.

THE ARAB EYE

Armaleh resorted to the humanist framework of 14th-century Kurdish geographer and historian Abulfeda's "Brief History of Humanity" (*Mukhtaṣar Tārīkh al-Bashar*) to inject political meaning in the devastating ironies of 1915 by assembling a collection that was at once ecumenical and humanistic. Deploying Arabic to tell this story, Armaleh simultaneously insisted on the very limits of language to convey the brute devastation of his world:

> "Even if we turned over every book of language, and studied the writings of the most eloquent of orators and the most articulate of speakers, we would scarcely find a title, epithet, or term that truly fits them. Thus, we acknowledge our inability and leave the task to others.
>
> We warn you: those who boast are seldom the bearers of good.
>
> We have seen their atrocities with our own eyes and witnessed their abominations firsthand. They are a people who have inherited the traditions of corruption and discord, and mastered the arts of lying and hypocrisy so thoroughly, in fact, that they have outdone even the most cunning deceivers in deceit, and surpassed wild beasts in savagery.
>
> They have become more ruthless than the lizard, darker than the serpent. They have claimed the lion's share of every form of wickedness, ferocious in nature, coarse in character. They have sunk deep into baseness and meanness, and abandoned all sense of honor and virtue.
>
> They have stripped away every Christian trait and trampled what is sacred to them. They have counted the spilling of blood, the enslavement of the free, and the violation of the sanctified as acts of glory and honor. As if to say: 'Among my people, I am the devil incarnate in evil and degradation.'

> Their affection turned to guile, and their pursuit became an ambush no one foresaw. Their cunning was constant, their loyalty treachery."[21]

Intertextuality powered a distinctive perspective to make sense of the hypocrisies of the late Ottoman rural elite by deploying what the monks at Bzommar later called an "Arab eye," a distinctive mental gaze that pierced through the unspoken coordination of a society realigned for the sake of collective financial gain.

Armaleh's narrative vividly portrayed the crucial role of this Arab eye in understanding and overcoming the aftermath of the catastrophe. Following the first two convoys of men ending in a nearby field by a random roadside, Tell Armen and Qṣur's flames were clearly visible from the high perch of Mardin, where the remaining women and children took refuge in their homes. They awaited their fate, dependent on the decisions of the notables, attempting to secure their safety by offering whatever resources they had left. The convoys kept departing, one after another, down the long road. Those left behind—unlisted, not yet summoned—scrambled to negotiate their own safety, slipping payments to notables and neighbors in hopes of delay. Mass killing, abduction, expulsion: all followed. And in Armaleh's Arabic, there was no word for it—except, perhaps, *nakba*.

During this time, Armenian deportees from other provinces began to flow along Mardin's main road toward the Syrian desert in the south, all observed under the scrutiny of Armaleh's Arab eye, which also turns, unflinchingly, toward the reader:

> "It is as if I see you, noble reader, perusing what has befallen you.
>
> From sorrowful events and distressing news that deepen your anguish, weigh upon your chest, and sap your energy. You might then wish for some relief to ease your heart and lift the burden from your spirit. And so, in response to your request, I have invited you today on an outing to the western part of the city, to the gate of al-Meshkiyeh, where the fields stretch over green, rain-fed lands whose vegetation has grown wild, whose trees are abundant, and whose fruits are plentiful and sweet.
>
> And here we are in the month of July, a perfect morning for a stroll. You are fortunate to take it early, for when the heat intensifies, one cannot make the return without strain or effort.
>
> Come with us, then, to the monastery vineyard of al-Firdaws, for a brief rest in its cooling shade. There, the gazelle still roams beneath the arbors, and the morning breeze carries the scent of the east. To you, beloved reader, we bring the bounty of the villages and orchards: baskets of legumes and berries, and fruits of all kinds: cherries, apricots, apples, pears, cucumbers, and celery. You see the villagers beaming with joy, proud of the abundance that has flowed into their hands. Their sacks are full of silver and gold coins. Security reigns over them, and peace settles in their midst. They wish this moment could last forever, as if the earth itself had come to rest beneath them.

[21] Armaleh, *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt,* 159–60.

How sweet the air that you breathe here! How fragrant the aromas that rise from these rich gardens. The bloom of flowers, the colors of roses, all seem to revive nature after its slumber, to send a new soul into its limbs after desolation. Look at the hills crowned with trees, where the noonday sun lays its crimson shawl. What a beautiful scene this is!

But by God, what is it that I now see before my eyes, O reader? But oh God, what do I see at the Spring of Omar Agha? It looks like a flock of sheep or cattle. I see a large caravan. Come, the spectacle has been arranged. I see an army, mostly women and children, about ten thousand people, with a few elderly men and women among them. I see soldiers surrounding them, beating them and kicking them, driving them forward as they flee in front of them, without any protection from the rifles that loom over them. My ears hear sounds like gunshots. A small group has been separated, surrounded by some soldiers. I see them being dragged violently, mercilessly into that dreadful place.

Oh God. Where are they taking them? To the well, as they did yesterday and the day before? They stripped them, drew their knives, slaughtered them, and threw them on their heads, then returned. What cruelty and harshness

A group of them has been separated by the soldiers. I see them pleading, crying out in pain. 'O God! O son! O mother!' they scream. Just yesterday they were in their homes. Now, stripped bare, knives are drawn against them. Their goods are looted. They are separated, husband from wife, child from parent, and dragged away, mocked, and beaten.

Here is a group torn from the road and thrown into the bend of the southern valley. Look, these are the people of the village of al-Meshkiyeh. They have turned on the deportees like wild dogs. They pounce on them, seeking to defile them, to rob them, to force them to convert. They dishonor their women and slaughter them, then return, bragging of their cruelty. They return and say, like ʿAntarah:

> To us belong the souls, to the birds the flesh,
> To the wild beasts the bones, and to the horsemen the loot.

Here comes the rest, wave after wave, like locusts, numbering eight thousand. How strange. A moment ago, they were around ten thousand. So where have the two thousand gone? If the tyrannical enemies have killed two thousand souls in the span of three hours, how many were there when they were first uprooted from their homeland? Surely, they must have been far more than this number.

And I heard a few days ago that they numbered fifty thousand. They are coming from Erzurum, Lejeh, Kharput, and the surrounding Armenian lands. Now they have reached the cistern, thirsty, but the soldiers will not let them cool their parched throats. Instead, they force them to march fiercely. Here they are, leaning on each other, their chests inflamed. And the women are carrying children on their shoulders.

> Here come the elders of the town, with gray hair, mounted on horseback. They are followed by children and women, running and rushing in confusion, their mouths wide open in excessive laughter, as if their minds are filled with thoughts of greed and envy. They race their horses to reach the spring, each trying to outdo the other in stealing and abducting. Beware that they do not see us. Come, let us hide under this tree lest we be afflicted by undesirable consequences."[22]

Mardin ended up being one of the last stations for many WWI deportees, before their struggle against the odds in the Syrian desert. Its green fields became killing fields, its wells, resting silos, and its Armeno-Syrian villages, such as Tell Armen and Qṣur, infrastructures of war. The anticipated prosperity and financial gains enabled by the Baghdad Railway materialized in processes of dispossession and dehumanization during which various localities were clandestinely targeted for concealing weapons and fighters, a violence that was unleashed as part of the coming succession of convoys from the north. Successive deportation convoys left various segments of the population in charge of negotiating protection, initiating a performative process of commodification of which the local residents fell victims.

Throughout the journey of genocide as described by Armaleh, there was a clear emphasis on the responsibility of the state and the rule of wealth, especially the Agricultural Bank and a corrupt history of loaning among notables. In the end, attempts at protecting oneself through payment delivered to former neighbors and friends were like feeding a raven. It began with assets and jewelries, furniture and food stocks, houses and gardens and, eventually, bodies. As Armaleh put it, from buying land deeds and rare manuscripts to everyday decorative objects, "each one took his part in the silence" in Mardin during rushed auction markets in the city center, "like a merchant in a rush to travel, selling his assets hastily so as not to miss opportunities."[23] Cologne (*kolonya*) makers, eager to bottle purity, were quick to snatch up precious manuscripts for a pittance—soon repurposed as luxe wrapping for their antiseptic concoctions, so the living could wash their hands clean while the dead stayed inked in forgotten script. Whereas urban markets tended to focus on goods, those taking place in the surrounding countryside such as Tell Armen and Qṣur witnessed transactions between soldiers and irregulars of entire convoys and what they potentially held, weaving human lives into these transactions.

Arabic offered a set of references that spoke to the image of an imponderably wasteful enterprise of calculated rejection and appropriation born in concerted human greed and religious prejudice. Its technicians, visible to an Arab eye, were local partakers who exploited the good that was being done to them. Trust and the prompt delivery of payments to the notables for protection made vulnerable women and children both contribute to the well-being and wealth of their former neighbors while simultaneously participating in a spiral whereby their dignity and personhood were eroded with each new transaction until death, expulsion, or captivity and as-

[22] Ibid., 261–4.
[23] Ibid., 445–6.

similation. The Arab eye was attuned to grasping this performative process of *nakabāt*, carving out a lexicon that could speak back to its destructive sway while lifting precedingly unimaginable horizons in its wake.

UTMOST DISASTERS

In 1927, as the last refugees made their escape from Mardin, Armaleh published another collection titled: "Solace of the Pioneers in the Proverbs of Mardin" (*Salwā al-Raʾidin fi Amthāl Mardin*). Armaleh did it for his compatriots, scattered across the corners of the country, and the world, so that they might find some joy in the familiar rhythms and phrases that once filled their homes. A necessary sequel to *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt*, this volume offered echoes of a lost world—preserved in proverbs—offered comfort in exile, even as the past itself slipped out of reach. While the Sykes-Picot Agreement sealed borders that cut Mardin off from Syria, he wrote that after the "hardships and sufferings they endured during the devastating war," his compatriots would find refuge in the irony and wit of Arabic, not so much for speaking the language but rather for seeing through what it could convey, for "these common proverbs," he wrote "despite their simplicity, contain much wisdom and numerous benefits."[24] He included their original text, preserving its charm and meaning in the Mardin vernacular, preceded by the following disclaimer:

> "No matter how far a person travels east or west, they always yearn for their homeland and long to hear news of their family and friends. How deeply their heart stirs when, in their exile, they encounter someone from their hometown who shares their accent, or when memories of their family's circumstances are rekindled. And if one of them shares a joke, a story, or a proverb specific to their homeland, it serves to strengthen the bonds of friendship and brotherhood."[25]

This tradition of collecting proverbs was later perpetuated by the Aleppo-based Armenian Catholic priest and scholar Yusef Qushaqji, a relative of his 19th-century namesake and scholar.[26] Like Armaleh, Qushaqji was haunted by the preservation of these Upper-Mesopotamian cultures which he adapted to the context of Aleppo, contributing to the city's Arabic ecumenical heritage. This pursuit led him to assemble a large, if not the largest extant, collection of Alepine proverbs, offering a record of coexistence and shared imagery among various segment of popular constituencies.[27] Upon receiving it, the Raqqa-based Syrian novelist ʿAbd al-Salam al-ʿUjayli wrote that "the unique anecdotes scattered within […] bring smiles to one's face and even

---

[24] al-Qaīs Isḥāq Armaleh al-Siryāni al-Katoliki, *Salwā al-Raʾidin fi Amthāl Mardin* (Beirut: Maṭbaʿat al-Siryāniyah, 1927), 4.

[25] Armaleh, *Salwā al-Raʾidin,* 3.

[26] Yūsuf Qūshāqjī (ed.), Akhbār Ḥalab Kamā Katabahā Naʿūm Bakhkhāsh fi Dafātir al-Jamʿiyya (Aleppo: Maṭbaʿat al-Iḥsān, 1985 - 1994).

[27] al-Ab Yūsef Qūshāqjī, *al-Amthāl al-Shaʿbiyah al- Ḥalabiyah wa Amthāl Mardin*, vol 1 (Aleppo: Maṭbaʿat al-Aḥsān, 1985, 1987, 1992).

cause loud laughter."[28] George Qalaws, a reader from Venezuela, wrote that he "devoured it with an insatiable appetite, from cover to cover, reading many sections more than once, sometimes even four or five times." "Each time," he added "I felt an unparalleled joy, as it transported me from the skies of Caracas to the skies of Aleppo, and from the near present to the distant past."[29]

In the shadow of a world that clung to poetic phantoms of a lost paradise, the tradition of *nakba* narratives found new lives shortly after the publication of Armaleh's *al-Quṣarā fi Nakabāt*. This movement was driven forward by intellectual figures such as Ameen Rihani, whose collaboration with Kurd Ali's Academy in Damascus forged a bridge between memory and historical critique in the present. Kurd Ali provided Rihani with his latest archival documents on Syrian history, curated to enable a reading of history through the lens of social science. Rihani adapted these materials in a 1928 essay, titled "The Disasters: A Brief History of Syria from the First Age After the Flood to the Age of the Republic in Lebanon" (*al-Nakabāt: Khulaṣat Tārīkh Sūriyā mindh al-ʾAhed al-Awal Baʾd al-Ṭūfan ilaʾAhed al-Jumhūriya bi-Lubnān*).[30] Here, he wielded the concept of *nakabāt* to narrate the history of Greater Syria, capturing the trauma that unfolded with the creation of the Lebanese Republic and the mandates system at large—a colonial fragmentation that had left Syria scarred by the bombings in Damascus during the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925. In the decades that followed, *nakba* narratives proliferated with the Great Arab Revolt of 1936–9 and the 1948 Nakba of Palestine. Drawing on Rihani's essay, the Damascene historian and diplomat Constantine Zurayk penned *The Meaning of Disaster* (*Maʾnā al-Nakba*), modeling a national discourse to the demands of postcolonial Arab states.[31] *Nakba*, once a localized cry, emerged as a potent idiom of disaster in Arabic and beyond.

[28] Qūshāqjī, *al-Amthāl al-Shaʿbiyah*, 5.

[29] Qūshāqjī, *al-Amthāl al-Shaʿbiyah*, 6.

[30] Muhammad Kurd Ali, *Khiṭaṭ al-Shām* (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat al-Ḥāditha, 1924–28); Ameen Rihani, *al-Nakabāt: Khulaṣat Tārīkh Sūriyā mindh al-ʾAhed al-Awal Baʾd al-Ṭūfān ilaʾAhed al-Jumhūriya bi-Lubnān* (Beirut: Ṣadr Rihani, 1928); A private letter between Rihani and Kurd Ali suggests that the former had relatives in the Mardin area, Albert Rihani, *al-Riḥani wa Muʾāṣirauh: Rasāʾil Udabāʾ Ilayh* (Beirut, Dār al-Rihanī lil-Ṭibaʾah wa al-Nashr, 1966), 75.

[31] Constantine Zurayk, *Maʾnā al-Nakba* (Beirut: Dār al-ʾUlūm lil-Malayīn, 1948).