THE ARMENIANS OF URFA AND THE LIMITS OF FOREIGN PROTECTION, 1919–1920

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Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, Colombia, 12 June 2026

In the spring of 1920, the city of Urfa—known in antiquity as Edessa—became the scene of one of the most consequential episodes in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide. For the Armenians who returned there, survival had already demanded the unimaginable. What followed demanded something different: faith in the promises of foreign protection.

A City Between Destruction and Return

By the end of the First World War, Urfa had been transformed. The Armenian Genocide of 1915 had shattered a community that had existed in the region for centuries. Deportations, massacres, starvation, and forced conversions had reduced the Armenian presence to a fraction of its former size.

The Armistice of Mudros in October 1918 briefly altered the political landscape. The Ottoman Empire had been defeated, and Allied forces began occupying strategic areas across Anatolia. British forces entered Urfa in March 1919, creating a temporary sense that the wartime chaos had ended. For Armenian survivors scattered across Syria, Lebanon, and beyond, these developments appeared to offer an opportunity. Some returned from refugee camps. Others emerged from cities such as Aleppo, where many deportation routes had ended. Their return was not driven by confidence but by necessity. Despite everything, Urfa remained home.

Later that year, under Anglo-French agreements that redistributed occupation responsibilities, Britain transferred control of Urfa to France. French forces entered the city in October 1919. Under French occupation, elements of Armenian communal life began to re-emerge. Schools reopened. Churches resumed limited activity. Aid organizations distributed assistance. Community leaders interacted openly with occupation authorities.

Many Armenians interpreted the French presence as more than a temporary military arrangement. France had cultivated an image as a protector of Christian communities in the Ottoman East. Armenian volunteers had served alongside French forces in formations such as the *Légion d'Orient*. Many believed these alliances with the Allies would eventually support an Armenian political future in Cilicia and neighboring regions.

The significance of French rule lay less in what it achieved than in what it appeared to promise. Flags, uniforms, official meetings, and military patrols suggested permanence. For a population that had survived extermination, such symbols carried enormous psychological weight.

The Armenians' faith in the future was encouraged, nurtured, and ultimately disappointed.

The Rise of Turkish Nationalism

While Armenian communities attempted to rebuild, a rival political force was consolidating itself. The Turkish National Movement, led by Mustafa Kemal, rejected the postwar settlement imposed on

the defeated Ottoman Empire. Nationalist organizations emerged throughout Anatolia and increasingly coordinated military resistance against Allied occupations.

In southeastern Anatolia, French forces soon faced sustained opposition. Fighting erupted in Marash, Antep, and Urfa. Supply lines were vulnerable, casualties mounted, and support in France for prolonged military commitments diminished. Occupation became increasingly expensive and politically difficult.

As Turkish nationalist victories accumulated, Allied governments adjusted their policies accordingly. French policymakers gradually concluded that preserving their broader strategic interests in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean mattered more than maintaining costly positions deep inside Anatolia. France increasingly sought accommodation rather than confrontation. The Armenians, who had placed their hopes in French protection, were not participants in the negotiations. In the Treaty of Ankara of October 1921, France formally recognized the new Ankara government and withdrew from contested territories in Cilicia and neighboring regions.

On 11 April 1920, a mere six months after their arrival in Urfa, French forces evacuated. The departure marked the removal of the military structure upon which Armenian life depended. When French forces withdrew from Urfa, they did more than abandon a military position. They left behind a population that had reorganized its existence around the expectation of Allied protection. It was the collapse of the belief that the victorious powers of Europe would decisively intervene on behalf of Armenian survivors.

Armenian civilians who had associated themselves with French authority suddenly found themselves exposed. Many fled. Others attempted to hide. Property was looted, arrests followed, and many families once again joined the growing ranks of refugees moving south toward Syria. Some armed groups resisted.

The precise sequence of events remains contested in some historical accounts. What is not contested is that the departure of the French eliminated the only external power willing—or able—to provide immediate protection to the Armenian population of Urfa.

The tragedy of Urfa was not that Europe was unaware of Armenian suffering. By 1920, Armenian losses were among the most documented humanitarian catastrophes of the era. The tragedy was that awareness did not translate into sustained protection.

The events in Urfa reflected a wider reality of postwar diplomacy.

In August 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres proposed the creation of a greatly enlarged Armenian state and appeared to vindicate decades of Armenian appeals for international protection. Yet the treaty only existed on paper. It lacked the military force necessary for implementation and was rejected by the Turkish National Movement.

Memory and Political Consequence

The memory of Urfa survived long after the city itself was lost to its Armenian inhabitants. It entered the collective memory of the Armenian diaspora and became part of a broader narrative of abandonment stretching from the time of the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s to the genocide of 1915, and the diplomatic failures that followed the Great War. Within that broader story, Urfa became a symbol—not only of military defeat, but of misplaced faith in external guarantees.

The campaign known as *Operation Nemesis* emerged from a conviction that international justice had failed. The assassinations carried out by Armenian operatives were presented by their organizers as a response to impunity and unfulfilled promises.

Lessons for Today

History never repeats itself exactly. France today is a democratic republic operating within institutions such as the European Union and NATO rather than a colonial power managing imperial possessions. The Armenia of the twenty-first century is not the Armenia of 1920.

Yet one lesson remains relevant.

Small nations often seek security through alliances with larger powers. Such alliances can be valuable, even indispensable. But they are rarely based on sentiment alone. Great powers act primarily according to their perceived interests, and those interests can change. The lesson of Urfa is therefore not that alliances are worthless. It is that no alliance should be mistaken for unconditional commitment.

For Armenians and nations situated between larger geopolitical forces, security ultimately depends upon a combination of diplomacy, partnerships, internal resilience, and realistic expectations. Foreign support may be genuine. It may even be substantial. But history suggests it should never be assumed to be permanent.

Conclusion

The fall of Urfa in April 1920 marked more than the end of a brief period of relative security for its Armenian inhabitants. It marked the collapse of a political expectation. French occupation had encouraged Armenian survivors to return, rebuild their institutions, and believe that the postwar order would provide a measure of protection. When French forces withdrew under mounting military and political pressure, that expectation collapsed with them.

States often describe their decisions in the language of necessity: strategic withdrawal, realignment, stabilization, or diplomatic accommodation. These terms explain policy, but they do not erase its human consequences. For the Armenians of Urfa, the consequence was devastating. A community that had already survived genocide discovered that international concern and international protection were not the same thing.

The significance of Urfa lies not only in what happened there, but in what it revealed about the

nature of power in international affairs. By 1920, Armenian suffering was widely known. Humanitarian reports, diplomatic correspondence, missionary accounts, and press coverage had documented the destruction of Ottoman Armenian communities in extraordinary detail. Yet sympathy did not guarantee intervention, and promises did not guarantee permanence.

This does not mean that alliances are meaningless or that foreign partnerships should be rejected. On the contrary, small states often depend upon external relationships for their security and survival. The lesson is: alliances are strongest when they rest on converging interests, not merely on shared values or expressions of goodwill. When interests change, commitments can weaken, sometimes abruptly.

Urfa therefore remains relevant not because it proves that one particular country cannot be trusted, but because it illustrates a recurring pattern in international politics. Great powers may act generously, honorably, and consistently for long periods of time. Yet they remain guided primarily by strategic calculations rather than by moral obligation alone. For vulnerable nations, the wisest course is neither cynicism nor blind faith, but a clear-eyed understanding of this reality.

For Armenians, the memory of Urfa endures as a reminder that survival cannot rest entirely in the hands of others. Diplomacy, alliances, and international support are indispensable. But lasting security ultimately depends on a society's own resilience, institutions, and capacity to adapt when external guarantees prove less certain than they once appeared.

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Comments



Varouj Pogharian – 2026-10-20 16:54:25

Hagop: I will be publishing a historical novel very soon entitled "The Earth Coughs Up Bones When It Rains." It is a deeply researched novel about the Genocide and what followed. I devote a full chapter to Urfa, transitioning from the raw horror of the genocide to the chaos of Urfa and Smyrna, and into the difficult work of survival, memory, and the fight for historical truth. I hope Armenians and non-Armenians (including Turks and Kurds) will find it informative. This is my timeline on Urfa: British Arrival: 24 March 1919. French Takeover: 30 October 1919 (per the Syrian Agreement). French Withdrawal: 11 April 1920. French forces departed the city at 1:00 AM. Even though the departure was agreed to by the Kenmalists, the retreating French were ambushed and slaughtered. The Armenians suffered a two-stage erasure. Immediately after the French withdrawal, they began emigrating, with many to Cyprus, Egypt, or Syria. In February 1923, the Kemalists ordered all Armenians to leave Urfa, Marash, and Biridjik. You might be interested in the opening of my Urfa chapter: (Jack is the novel's protagonist.) "American volunteers working for the Near East Relief—the U.S. congressionally chartered humanitarian organization established to aid survivors of the Armenian massacres, particularly orphaned children—stopped at the YMCA in Smyrna on their way to British-occupied Urfa. Urfa was one of the few places where Armenians were cautiously attempting to return. Some came in the hope of recovering their homes and livelihoods; others had nowhere else to go. The aid workers spoke of reopening shops, replacing looms and tools, and providing seed money to help Armenian craftsmen and merchants rebuild what they had lost. They seemed intent on putting practical assistance ahead of sermons. They carried ledgers, inventories, and cash rather than Bibles, which pleased Jack. He believed his fluency in Armenian and proficiency in Turkish would be useful in the aid effort. He offered to accompany them to Urfa." And this is my final Urfa scene: A boy not older than ten arrived at the tower. “Commander Yervant sends a message. He wants you to leave now. The French are retreating to Syria. The noose will tighten. His exact words.” “How about you and your family?” “We’re trying to hide with an Assyrian family. Others are begging their Turkish neighbors for shelter. We’re nearly out of food, and water is running low.” “Go,” Jack said. “Go quickly.” The boy saluted awkwardly and went down the stairs. Jack looked out over the city with the rifle across his knees. Yervant’s words returned to him: If we die standing, then at least we leave proof that we existed. Two days later, the French garrison began its negotiated retreat, their wounded accounted for and their weapons stacked under supervision. Officers shouted commands not many obeyed. The procession had the look of a ritual of an ending already broken. “The choreography of surrender,” Jack thought, watching from above. The French had not gone far when rifle fire rolled. Nationalist and Kurdish fighters had waited behind the rocks. Some French soldiers scrambled up the stony rise on one side, and others threw themselves into the gully on the other. Men dropped their rifles and lifted their hands. A white flag rose, fell, rose again. It made no difference. One after another, the French soldiers were shot where they stood. The corpses were looted. Rings were torn from fingers, uniforms slit open for hidden coins, belt buckles ripped away like spoils from an altar. The victors swaggered toward Urfa. From the ends of some lances hung severed heads, blackening in the sun, covered with flies. To Jack’s shock, one of them appeared to be Pierre Saint-Martin’s. He could not be certain. The mouth hung open as if it might yet shape one more clever remark, the mustache was stiff with dried blood, and the eyes were fixed in a stare. He remembered Pierre as he had been: witty, weary, and amused by ruin. The chessboard, his dry laugh, the conversation about empires falling like scaffolding. À la chute des empires, he had said, lifting his glass. Tragic to live through, delicious to watch. Now the empire had fallen, and Pierre had fallen with it. What remained of him was rotting somewhere under the open sky. The sun itself had become an accomplice. Jack stayed invisible in the tower as riders and men on foot entered the Armenian quarter. They passed the abandoned defenses without resistance. Urfa’s Armenians had already surrendered. As soon as the sun set, he went down. He found an empty building and sat against the wall, listening to the tread of hooves, the occasional crash of a door splintering under a boot, and screams. In the morning, from his hiding place he heard the mayor speak. “Our conflict was with the French, not with the Armenians,” he announced. “Return to your homes. You have nothing to fear.” No one moved. The words sounded too much like the promise made to the retreating French. Jack heard the first shots, then shouting, then the rapid crack of rifles. Smoke began to rise from the Armenian quarter. Flames leapt from roof to roof. The smoke thickened until the streets vanished under a shroud. He tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and covered his mouth, then stepped outside. The city had become a furnace. He moved through the haze with one hand against the walls, groping as a blind man might. A woman ran past carrying a child. Her dress caught fire. Jack reached for her, but she fell into the fire. In a side street, he saw dogs nosing at bodies in a gutter. He saw something glint—a watch chain, but no watch, on a headless corpse. He pulled the chain free without knowing why and slipped it into his pocket. As he turned away, a crow landed on the body, cocked its head, and began to peck. Behind a stable, he found a horse tied to a post, trembling so violently he hesitated to approach it. “Easy,” he whispered. The horse pulled hard against the rope. Jack advanced slowly. “Easy. Easy.” He stood beside it and laid a hand on its neck. The coat was slick with sweat. The saddle leather burned his palm. For a moment neither moved. He cupped water from a puddle and sprinkled it over the horse and saddle before loosening the rope. He stopped at a stream. The horse was thirsty. He knelt and cupped water in his hands. He did not drink right away. He watched the water slip through his fingers under moonlight and go back into the current. He bowed his head. The stream moved on, indifferent to grief. He had no explanation for why he had lived while Pierre was dead, while the woman with the child was dead, and perhaps all the Armenians of Urfa were dead. Survival no longer felt like fortune. It felt like judgment. “Cristina. Forgive me for surviving,” he whispered. He thought of Mehmet. What he would not give to have him beside him now: his low voice, his patient humor, the way he could speak to gendarmes without provoking them, the way he carried the road’s burden and made it seem almost light. He remembered the insult he had thrown at him. Shame cut through him like a blade. He rode west all night. In the morning, the smoke over Urfa still refused to disperse. Thank you for your interest. Varouj Pogharian Bogota



Hagop Kiledjian – 2026-09-21 08:45:29

Thank you for your informative article. I have tried for years to find out the year that Urfa Armenians left in mass from their city after the French left. Would you happen to know?



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-06-20 14:51:31

Dear Varouj, Thank you for this measured and thoughtful article on the Armenians of Urfa. In my view, one of the strongest aspects of your essay is the careful distinction you draw between “expectation” and “commitment.” These two are often confused in many narratives. You, however, honestly hold together both the psychological sense of security created by French flags, military presence, and institutional visibility, and the fact that France had not assumed a formal and binding obligation. This is a rare form of intellectual maturity in historical writing. Still, with your permission, I would like to think through a few points with you. First: You clearly show that French strategy changed and that great powers act according to their interests. But does reading the fall of Urfa mainly through the politics of great powers risk underestimating the weight of local dynamics? The alliance formed by the Turkish National Movement with local tribes, Kurdish notables, and urban elites in and around Urfa was one of the key factors that exerted military pressure on the French. Yet beyond this, the return of Armenian survivors also unsettled the local network of interests established after 1915. Their return did not merely mean that former inhabitants were coming back to their hometown. It also meant that confiscated property, altered social positions, and a complicity that had been buried under collective denial could become visible again. For this reason, the hostility of local forces toward Armenian return should be understood not only through nationalist ideology, but also through concrete relations of interest. Second: You do not touch upon the strategic debates within Armenian society itself. At that time, especially within the diaspora and among Armenian leaders in the region, there were serious disagreements over whether to rely on great powers or to prioritize self-defense and local accommodation. Did this debate find any echo in Urfa? Were there voices within the community that hesitated to trust French protection? Such an internal tension could have provided a more concrete historical basis for the idea of “internal resilience and institutions” that you emphasize at the end of your article. Third and finally: You rightly suggest that the lesson for today is neither cynicism nor blind faith, but a clear-eyed understanding of reality. This is a very important point. But what does such “clear-eyed understanding” mean in practice? When cooperating with a great power, what concrete preparations are required if one already knows that its interests may change? I ask this especially with today’s Armenia in mind, caught between Russia, the European Union, France, the United States, and Iran. You note that history does not repeat itself exactly. But if similar patterns do recur, what internal steps must a small state take to build resilience? Thank you again. Your article opened a new line of thought for me. The example of Urfa is illuminating not only for understanding the past, but also for thinking about the fragile position of present-day Armenia, precisely because it brings memory and strategic thinking together. Warm regards, Nurnisa



Vahe H Apelian – 2026-06-17 14:42:28

I first became aware of the 1915 heroic resistance of Urfa Armenians, in 1970, when my late uncle Antranig Chalabian, had Henry Glockler’s memoirs published in Beirut, as “Interned in Turkey, 191-1918.” Henry Wilfred Glockler was an employee of the American University of Beirut. He was a British subject, a nation at war with Turkey. Hence, the Turkish authorities had him exiled into the interior where he became an eye witness to the destitute Urfa Armenians, and had his eye witness accounts committed to a memoir. Antranig Chalabian wrote the following about Urfa Armenians: “Urfa's battle for existence is unique. The heroes of Van had a glimmer of hope that the advancing Russian Army would rescue them. The Mussa Dagh Armenians had the sea backing them and thus had a semblance of hope for rescue. When the Armenians of Urfa waged their decisive battle for existence they were cut off from the rest of the world and could harbor no hope from anywhere.” Apparently, the survivors clinged to their native land but were betrayed, after being left neglected.



Varouj Pogharian – 2026-06-16 15:36:56

Antoine: France’s priority in Asia Minor was securing Cilicia and southern Anatolia for economic and geopolitical reasons, not guaranteeing Armenian autonomy or pledging to safeguard Armenians. When French troops entered Urfa in October 1919, they reopened schools and churches, and distributed aid. Combined with France’s cultivated image as protector of Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire., the survivors of the genocide could not be faulted for interpreting flags, uniforms, and patrols as guarantees of safety. That was wishful thinking. At no time did the French make binding promises to the Armenians in Urfa. When Turkish nationalist resistance intensified, France withdrew, leaving the Armenians exposed.



Antoine S. Terjanian – 2026-06-16 07:02:36

Thank you Mr. Pogharian for another well informed article. Many of our people blame the French for not keeping their "promises". It is clear from your article that you believe that "expectations" or "wishful thinking" are not the same thing as official state promises and that no such official promises were ever made.by the French Government.