

AN ARAB HISTORIAN AND HIS CAUSE

Saleh Zahredeen Takes on the Armenian Genocide

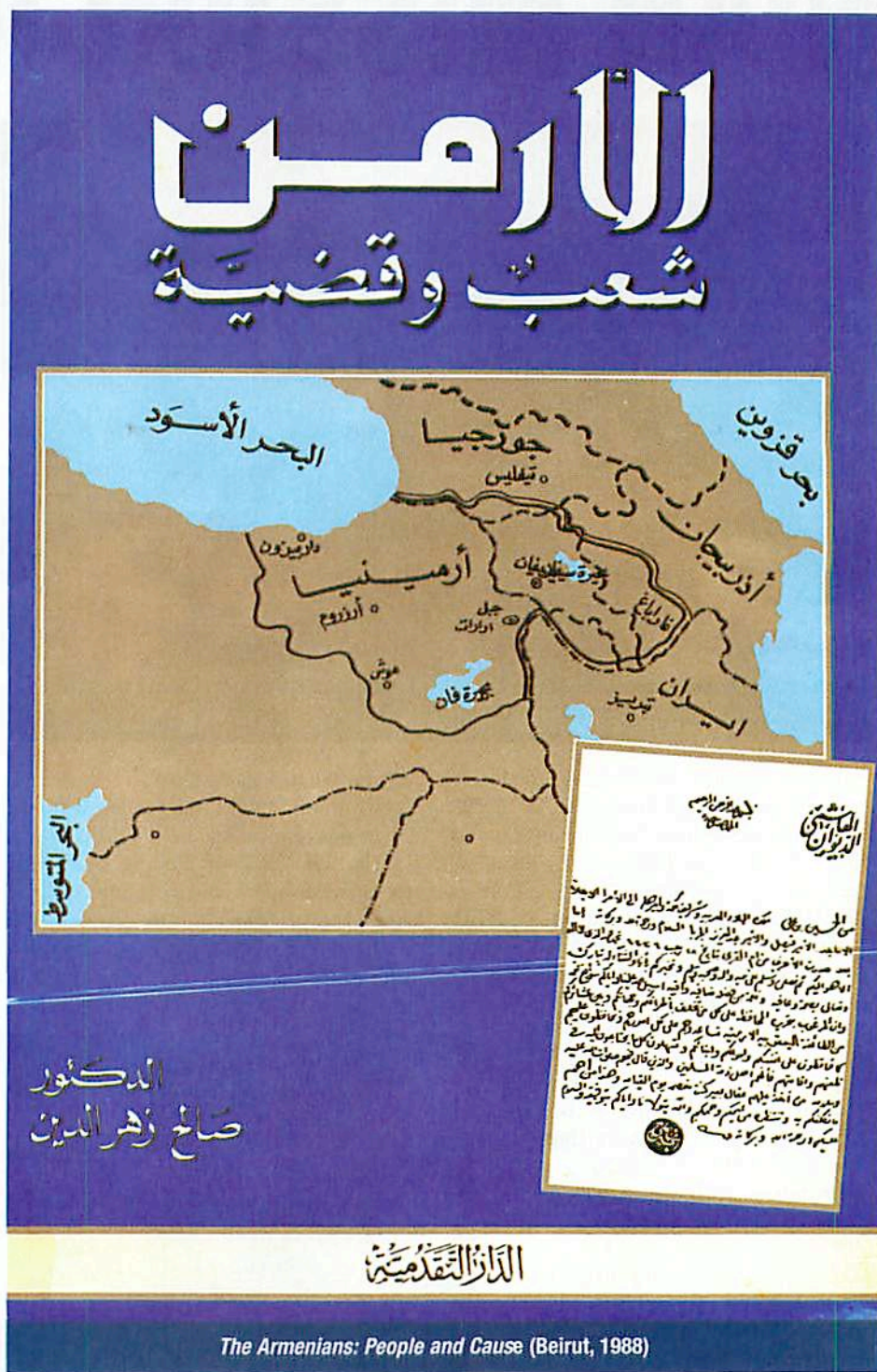
By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The truth shall be told even while hanging on the gallows," confidently affirms Saleh Zahredeen, 48, Lebanese Druze historian and author of a dozen books and pamphlets in Arabic on the Armenians and the Genocide.

Born in the Lebanese Shouf mountains and a member of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Zahreedin holds two doctorate degrees, the first from University of Paris VII, in history and civilization, and the second from Yerevan State University, where, in 1995, he successfully defended a thesis—the first by an Arab national since the establishment of the Armenian Academy of Sciences—on "Ottoman Policies in Western Armenia and the Position of the International Community."

"In the beginning, my knowledge of Armenian issues was very limited," says Zahredeen, that is, until 1985, when Walid Joumblatt, PSP leader, the flamboyant former minister of refugee affairs and the son of the late distinguished Lebanese politician Kamal Joumblatt, asked him to prepare a program on Armenians on the "Voice of the Mountain," the radio station of the Lebanese Druze.

"There was an information blockade concerning the Armenian genocide" in the Arab world, explains Zahredeen, a former history lecturer at the Lebanese University. "Since Armenians and Arabs have lived in



The Armenians: People and Cause (Beirut, 1988)

these countries for decades, we thought the Arabs should know about the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian Question."

Joumblatt's suggestion for the radio program had a larger context. "Human rights are the fundamental tenets of PSP, therefore, we wanted to present the Armenian Question as a case study of human rights violations. Such a genocide,

on such a scale, was unprecedented," says Zahredeen. "The Armenian Question does not only belong to the Armenians," he continues, "both because it is related to all of humanity, and because several nations were involved in the processes of genocide."

The 13-hour, twice-weekly radio program prepared by Zahredeen aired in 1985

reaching as far as Syria, Jordan and Cyprus.

After the success of the broadcast and the popular interest it created toward Armenian issues, Joumblatt suggested that Zahredeen should carry out further research on the Armenian Question.

"When I started my research," explains multilingual Zahredeen, "there was great difficulty in finding publications in Arabic—they were mostly in French, English and Armenian." Existing Arabic sources from the 1940s and 1950s discussed the Armenian genocide in passing or were dispersed in larger works. "There is a gap in Arabic literature between 1960s and 1980s on the Armenian Genocide."

Arabic sources on the Armenians were rare—other than Osman al'Turk's *Pages from the Armenian Nation's History* (Aleppo, 1960); Adib al'Sayid's *History of Armenians* (Aleppo, 1971); Marwan M'dawar's *Armenian History* (Beirut, 1982); Hassan Hafiz's *History of Armenians: from the Beginning until Now* (Cairo 1986).

Zahredeen's original research culminated in a 1988 publication, which bore the same title as the successful radio program—*Armenia: People and Cause*. The first 5000-copy edition is currently out of print. The 335-page *Armenia: People and Cause* is the first book in Arabic on the Armenian genocide "which cites extensive sources, provides footnotes and uses academically acceptable methodology," explains Zahredeen.

Turkish reaction to the book was consistent and severe. In addition to threats to his life by anonymous callers, "The Turkish military attaché in Beirut told me, 'you are persona non grata in Turkey'. I was expecting such reaction but thought it would be worse: A government that kills 1.5 million people could eliminate one person very easily," said Zahredeen.

The publication of the book even caused friction in the relations between

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Joumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party and the Turkish government. "Because the price of truth is very high, we were aware that there will be reactions and pressure, but the truth is more important," affirms Zahredeen. The Turkish-PSP "dispute" reached a point where the PSP sent a delegation to Turkey to study the Ottoman archives, but they were not given permission to even see them.

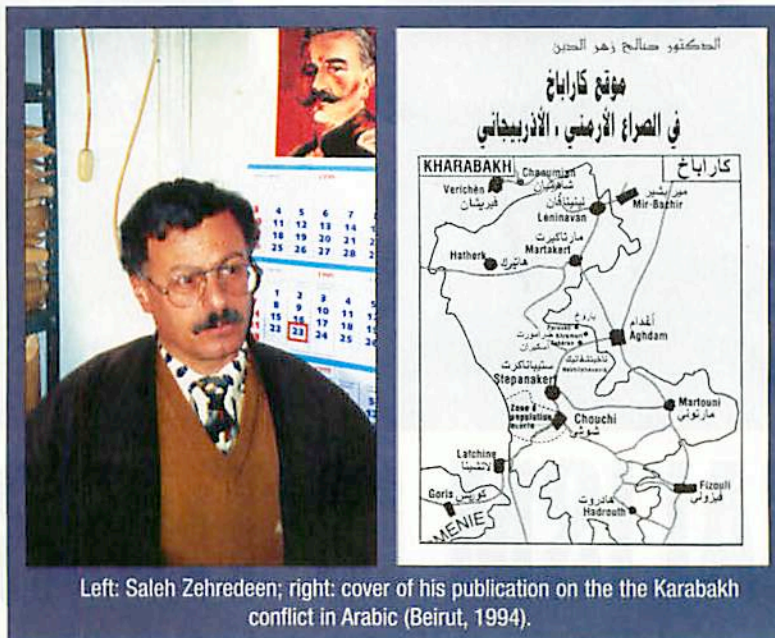
Since the publication of his first book on the Armenian Question, Zahredeen has

because of the geostrategic and security implications of Turkish-Israeli relations in the region."

Zahredeen recalls that when in the early 1990s he was giving lectures about Turkey's security threats to the Middle East, people used to tell him, "you're exaggerating." "Now we are seeing that Turkey is posing a threat to the region. Throughout the years, Turkey's presence in the Middle East and the Arab countries has been bloody," he says with a sense of vindication. "Indeed, what happened to the Armenians at the beginning of the century is continuing in the Middle East today—with the Kurds, the Arabs, the Armenians.

At the beginning of the century many Arabs were massacred too," affirms Zahredeen.

"Turkey used to fool the Arabs through Islam, but now it is clear where it stands," he continues. "Arab states seem to be more willing to accept the historical fact of the Armenian genocide." However, he emphasizes that this entails greater efforts by the Armenians and scholars in the region to enhance the process of recognition. "The Armenians are not doing enough to teach or present their case to the



Left: Saleh Zahredeen; right: cover of his publication on the the Karabakh conflict in Arabic (Beirut, 1994).

published several monographs on various aspects of the Armenian Genocide, as well as the Karabakh conflict. His most recent book is entitled *Jews in Turkey and their role in Turkish-Israeli Treaties* (Beirut 1998).

Genocide Recognition and the Arab World

Because of the increasing political and military affinity between Turkey and Israel in recent years, Zahredeen believes that, "Currently the situation is different," regarding the issue of formal recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Arab world. "The Arabs are more inclined to accept the historical fact of the Genocide, especially

Arab world," complains Zahredeen.

There are variations in the politics, culture and administrative apparatus of Arab states. They are not all the same. "There is a great difference between the ruler and the ruled in the Arab world," asserts Zahredeen. But, "I believe, the people – the Arabs – are willing to accept the genocide; however, in reality, the rulers determine political policies. Our trust is in the people which ultimately preserves the truth," says Zahredeen with a grain of hope.

In the meantime, Zahredeen continues his research and publishing. "As an Arab historian, I work for a particular cause, that's the Armenian Cause, because this cause is greater than any party, institution or individual. This is my principle." ■