

# Medieval Lobbyists

AUB Professor Explores Armenian-Moslem Relations in the Middle East

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

**T**he political and cultural history of the Armenians in the Near East is one of the least explored areas within traditional Armenian Studies. But Seta Dadoyan, Professor of Cultural Studies, Philosophy and Art at the American University of Beirut (AUB), has created a new interest in the subject – with a particular focus on its contemporary significance.

Dadoyan, one of only two Armenians with full-time professorial positions among AUB's 300-member faculty, published *The Fatimid Armenians: Cultural and Political Interaction in the Near East* in 1997. Published by Brill as part of a series on Islamic History and Civilization, the book explores Armenian history in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the "Armenian Period" in the last century of the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt.

Dadoyan's extensive research in primary Armenian and Arabic sources has turned up new data on Armenian-Moslem relations in the medieval Middle East.

She is a great believer in the multidisciplinary approach. "Research on Armenian themes should not be out of context," she insists. "Armenology as an exclusive field of study per se does not exist and never did. Armenian studies should be comparative, contextual, and interdisciplinary."

She explains that scholars have very little knowledge about, for example, "youth organization in Armenia in the 10th century."

Mentioned for the first time by historian Mateos of Urha, "These youth organizations were important social and lay organizations and played a great role in the process of urbanization and civic development," says Dadoyan, who had published a volume in 1991 on medieval and modern Armenian philosophy.

Having lived under Arab rule for centuries, Armenian-Moslem relations are particularly important.

"One of the issues in at least the medieval period is redefining Christian identity in the Islamic milieu, another major issue is the case of Moslem Armenians," explains Dadoyan,



Professor Seta Dadoyan in Beirut.

who has made the study of these themes the focus of her research.

But discussion of Armenian Moslems is one of the politically incorrect subjects in Armenian historiography. For decades, it has been a sensitive issue for Armenians both from political and religious perspectives.

"There is a tendency to discuss Armenian history from a nationalist point of view," says Dadoyan. "Love of one's nation is a matter of conscience, but it should not effect one's scholarship. Historical scholarship should not be a matter of feeling. On the contrary, it should be bold enough to see historical facts

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as facts. We should bring history out, determine the relations and describe them through accepted scientific methodologies," she insists.

Dadoyan has found much material on Armenia in Islamic literature, especially among the chroniclers of the period. She mentions the example of one chronicler, who in 1138, wrote about Armenian paramilitary "brothers" killed in the citadel of Baalbek (now in Lebanon). Dadoyan says that it would have been strange if there were only 30 Armenian (Moslem) brothers and only in Baalbek. There must have been others in other places as well. And she found them. So did her colleague, art historian Nairy Hampikian (see AIM December 1999.)

Dadoyan pieces together information dispersed in various texts and "reconstructs" a wider view of Armenians in the Islamic period. "You have to read a lot of sources to find these passing references to Armenians and put the story together."

One of the focal points of her study has been the typology of different political careers of Armenians in the Near East, especially in the Crusader period. She explains, for example, that efforts to install the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in the 12th century started decades before the kingdom was actually established. "Such 'unorthodox' information recorded in various sources constitutes some of the most interesting pages of Armenian history," says Dadoyan with excitement.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of her research is her discussion of Armenian "lobbying" in medieval times. As Armenians were under direct Islamic rule for 200 years, she argues that the Bagratuni Kingdom was established due to the efforts of an Armenian by the name of Yehya al-Armeni, who was a commander and governor of Darson and had lobbied on behalf of the Armenian King Ashot.

"There were many more Armenians in the high administrative and military establishments of the Arabs," she says. "These officials played a significant role in the life of Armenians spread throughout the Near East

and Armenia proper.”

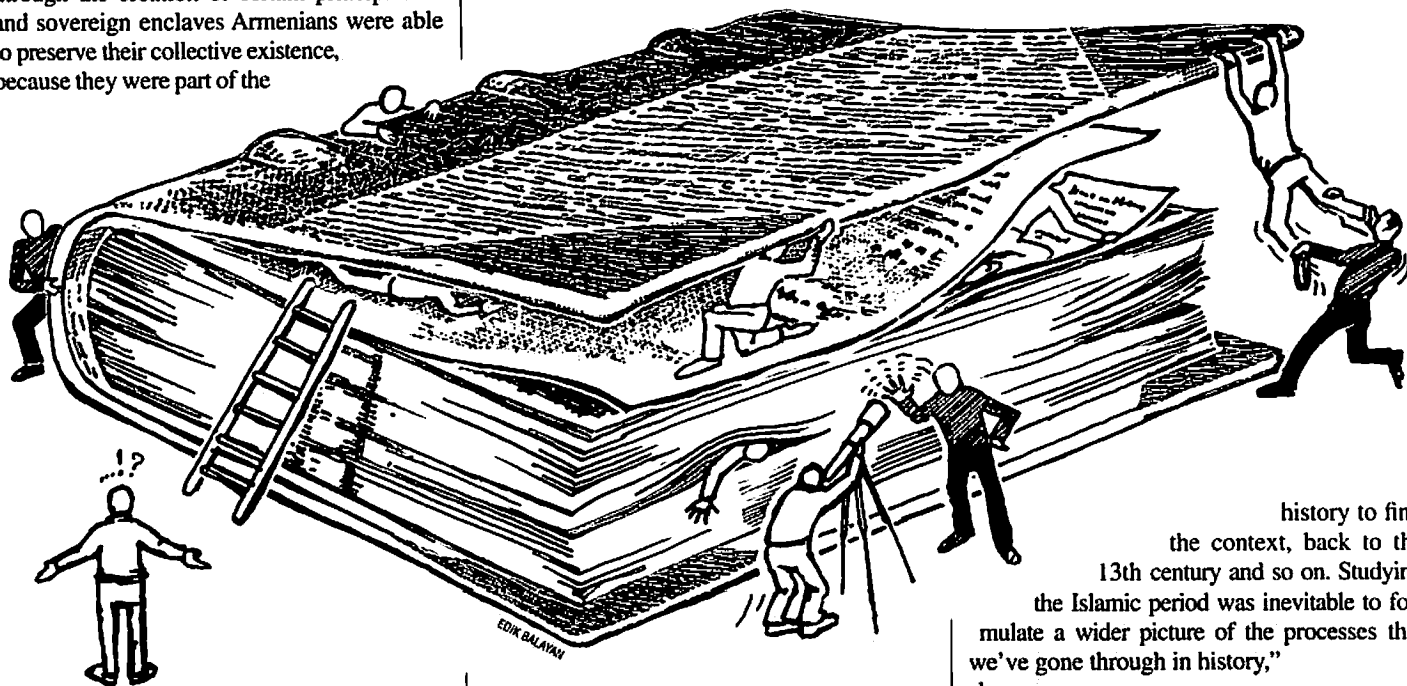
Between the fall of the Bagratuni Kingdom in 1045 and the establishment of the Cilician Kingdom in 1198, the central problem was finding a safe haven for Armenians, Dadoyan says. “For 150 years between these two kingdoms, Armenians were endangered: they could have been lost, assimilated. But through the creation of certain principalities and sovereign enclaves Armenians were able to preserve their collective existence, because they were part of the

“very interesting” times, Armenian historians “tend to want to create harmony in the collective history of the nation,” she continues.

“They tend to simplify matters by basically revolving everything around the church. This tendency is understandable in view of the pressures that Armenians were under. True that the church has played a very important role in the life

of identity, especially in the cultural realm,” she says with passion. She explains that “Armenian art in Lebanon is mostly a reflection of this crisis.”

Her intellectual and artistic search to determine what “Armenian art” is in the Lebanese context led her back to the earliest roots of the issue. “I started to go back into



social and political fabric of the ruling powers,” she continues.

Armenians were able to maintain a balance between major powers competing in the region. Still, “We’ve never had centralized leadership in our history except for short periods of time,” comments Dadoyan. “Armenians were spread all over the periphery of Armenia proper and politics was mostly local in nature, determined by the geostrategic conditions and circumstances of a given period.”

Stuck between Islam and Byzantium, “Armenian history has been imposed on us,” she says. “I would say starting from the fourth century, the issue of East and West has always been before us.”

Indeed, the East-West tension is most visibly manifested in Armenian Church history, which saw the emergence of several sectarian and dissident movements. “This East-West division is one of the most important arteries of Armenian history and the richest,” affirms Dadoyan.

While there are different schools of thought and controversies related to these

of the nation – even as a surrogate state in the absence of an Armenian state – but there is much more to Armenian history,” argues Dadoyan.

In addition to being a scholar of history, the Aleppo-born Dadoyan, who was raised and educated in Lebanon, is also a painter and an accomplished artist in her own right. In

history to find the context, back to the 13th century and so on. Studying the Islamic period was inevitable to formulate a wider picture of the processes that we’ve gone through in history,” she says.

She finds the contemporary processes of integration into local Lebanese society, on the one hand, and the parochial conservatism of community institutions on the other, as both inevitable and uncontrolled.

“We go through these processes without being aware of them. And we don’t choose between one or the other,” she

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fact, her first book is a study of Armenian painters in the Middle East.

Her interest in history stems from a contemporary problem.

“My research into the history of Armenian-Arab, Armenian-Islamic relations stems from the dilemma of contemporary Lebanese-Armenian identity. Lebanese-Armenianness is a condition, there is a crisis

says. “We do both: we open up and close in. This is a daily routine. We do not have integration in an organized, well-thought, methodic way.”

Dadoyan explains that the community does not have structures or institutions that would give shape to such processes. Other Lebanese Armenian intellectuals, artists and politician agree, “Integration is happening

by circumstantial processes, by accident, there is no vision of how that integration should be or could be.

"The fact that our Armenian social organizations in Lebanon are party affiliated has become a handicap for development," she continues. "There is no clear cultural direction and understanding in the post-war period in Lebanon."

For example, she points out the enormous decline of the educational level of Armenian schools in Lebanon. She sees the effects of this decline among the Armenian students who come to AUB to continue their higher education. Those students who come from non-Armenian private schools tend to do better, at least in their freshman year. Currently, among AUB's 7,000 students, there are about 100 Armenian students, who are mostly underclassmen and graduates of private schools.

Nevertheless, integration into main-

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stream Lebanese culture and society is taking place beyond the control of Armenian political parties, who traditionally have had a total hold over community institutions. They are aware of the process, but they themselves do not know how to deal with it or what to do about it. "There is a crisis of vision," according to Dadoyan.

"When political parties or organizations offer very little or nothing to a young

Armenian – in terms of social, cultural and communal life – how do you expect this young person not to be integrated into the 'other' where they can find what they are looking for?" asks Dadoyan.

"We can no longer exist as only party-affiliated Armenians," she cautions. "Today, Armenian party ideology belongs to a different world. It has very little to do with global reality. This is what the leadership has to understand."

As a historian familiar with Diaspora identity issues, Dadoyan defines being an Armenian in the Diaspora as "being aware of a crisis: The crisis of being an Armenian." This crisis is not always a negative condition, however.

"If you forget this crisis, then the issues become closed," she says. In fact, "It is this questioning, this inquiring of the existential concerns that provide motive to preserve what you have. The crisis is not emotional; on the contrary, it is intellectual." ■

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