

INTEGRATION THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Cabinet Minister Arthur Nazarian Discusses Lebanon and the Armenian Community



By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

After the 17-year devastation of the Lebanese civil war, Arthur Nazarian, 48, has been assigned, arguably, the most thankless job in the Lebanese government. The Beirut-born industrialist is both Minister of Tourism and Minister of the Environment.

"Our main effort in the Ministry of Tourism is to make tourism one of the important income generating sectors of Lebanese economy," explains Nazarian.

In its better days, considered the "Paris of the Middle East," Lebanon attracted thousands of tourists from around the world. The Mediterranean coastline spreading north to

south on the country's east and easily accessible lush green mountain resorts on the west made Lebanon one of the most attractive vacation and entertainment destination in the Middle East.

But the minister's task is daunting. The amelioration of infrastructure and restoration of confidence among tourists "require large amounts of funds and efforts," says Nazarian. "The World Bank and some Arab countries are helping us with loans, but what we need most are grants, not loans, which are generally for conducting studies rather than implementing projects."

The struggling Lebanese economy and

state budget shortfalls have forced Nazarian to secure funds from non-state sources for the ministry's projects. "We have an important role to play in making sure there is clean, safe and inviting environment for tourists to come. And we have to find the funds from somewhere."

In the Ministry of Environment, Nazarian faces even more challenges. "In this area our efforts focus on repairing the destruction done during the 17-year old civil war in Lebanon and fixing the damages that were done to the environment in the last two decades. We are trying as much as possible within the limitations of our budget. The state budget is very limited. We have to create new infrastructure, such as water and waste management. What little there was, was destroyed or damaged during the war. So we have a daunting challenges before us," admits the minister.

Under Nazarian's leadership an educational program on the importance of the environment has been started by the Ministry to make the population better informed and cognizant of their responsibility in protected nature.

Public schools have instituted environmental awareness programs, but Nazarian points that adults should learn first. "While the children are teaching the adults, the government needs to have certain programs in place to create awareness in society as a whole," he adds.

Unlike in the previous government where most ministers were "political appointees" affiliated with various parties, the new Prime Minister of Lebanon, Selim Hoss, appointed only professionals to his cabinet.

Arthur Nazarian is a textile engineer and manufacturer, who joined his family business upon completing his studies in Philadelphia.

There is also another political "tradition" in Lebanon. "The formation of a new cabinet is based on a 'quota system' reflecting Lebanon's sectarian makeup," explains Nazarian. "According to this system, when the government is made of up to 16 ministers, at least one Armenian is appointed to the cabinet. When the cabinet is made of over 24 ministers, two Armenians are appointed. (In the previous government of Rafik Hariri there were two Armenian ministers.) Nazarian was chosen in the Hoss government from a short list of candidates for his professional career and experience, and most important for not being affiliated with any political party.

A New School of Thought

Nazarian, the father of three children, grew up in Lebanon and attended the Demirjian Armenian School. An active member of community cultural and social life, he has been one of the proponents of a "new school" of thought in Lebanon that advocates coming out of the Armenian ghetto and integrating into main stream society.

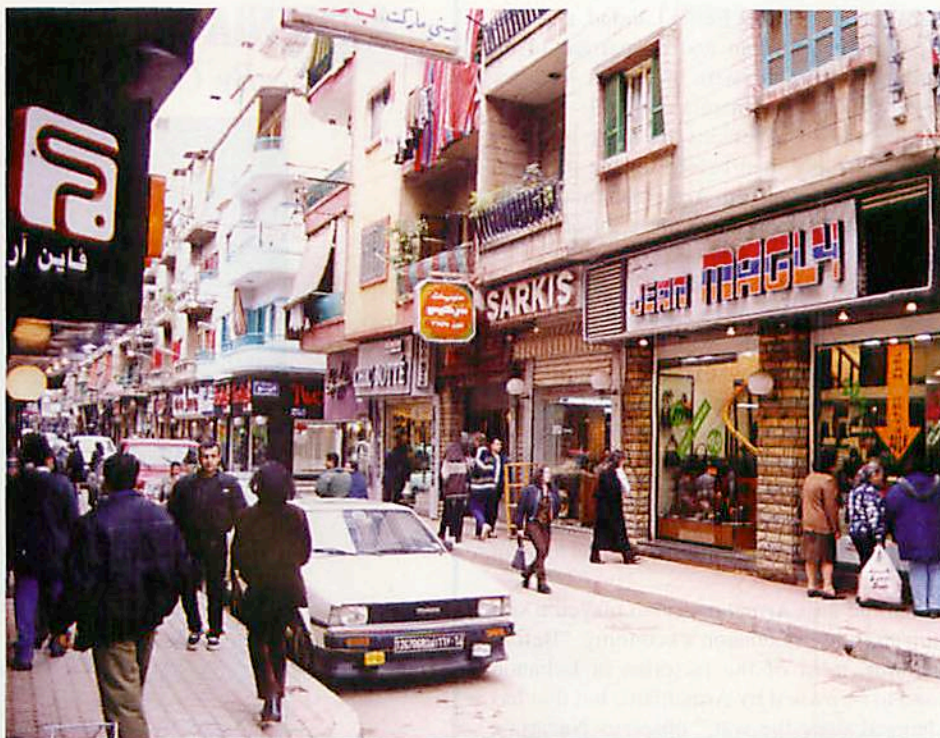
"I believe the current period is one of the best periods in the history of the Armenian community of Lebanon, despite the fact that many emigrated during the last two decades," Nazarian affirms with optimism.

"We have opened up to society from our ghettos more than anytime before. Armenians used to associate and socialize only with Armenians, but now we have a different picture. Armenians freely associate and open up to a variety of circles in society. Weather in terms of education or social affairs, an Armenian is able to compete alongside others," he explains.

Giving his own case as an example, he points out the importance of involvement in government affairs. "Until recent years, we had not entered into government and state structures. We rarely had Armenian civil servants working in the government apparatus. Perhaps because Armenians were more ambitions and thought of a government job as limited, both financially and in scope."

Nazarian mentions that the general director of the Ministry of Environment is a 31-year-old Armenian, Berj Hajenian, a PhD who has taught at the American University of Beirut. "This is new for Lebanon because generally high government positions are appointed from within and not outside. But now we have professionals from outside filling important positions. Hajenian was appointed to the post and not promoted from within," he says.

The debate over "integration" versus "preservation" is a thorny topic in Lebanese-Armenian community circles. The traditional political parties and institutions, holding on to their well-established roots and modus operandi, argue that integration would lead to assimilation. Meanwhile, integration has been taking place, especially among the youth, beyond the control of the Armenian "establishment." Today Armenian professionals and university graduates are less likely to affiliate with political parties, which still enjoy large clout in Lebanese politics, and have found greater opportunities and success in main stream Lebanese society. Indeed,



The Armenian neighborhood of Burj Hammoud is a 'shoppers mecca' in Beirut, where virtually anything can be sold or bought. Popularly known as the "Armenian ghetto," in recent years Burj Hammoud has become one of the most important commercial centers in Lebanon.

whether in the arts, sciences or the media, many Armenians have reached prominent positions without the support or perceived legitimacy that once the Armenian political parties provided.

Perhaps the most unexpected change in the "mission" of the established community institutions – the preservation of Armenian

identity – was the collapse of the Soviet Union. "I would say, especially after Armenia's independence some of the burdens of 'preservation of the nation' has been eased," says Nazarian. "Now Armenians are much more united, in terms of the youth and political issues," he adds.

Most Lebanese are quick to mention that

Philanthropic Tradition

The Nazarian family's roots go back several centuries. According to *The History of the Nazarian Family 1475-1988* (published in Beirut), the Nazaronis, were well-known merchants and philanthropists in the ancient capital city of Ani. After the fall of the Bagratuni kingdom, the clan moved to Julfa in northern Iran, which was a major trade center between Asia and Europe. Later generations moved to Isfahan, Upper Akulis, Geghargunik, Nakhichevan, Karabakh, St. Petersburg and Moscow. There, the family known as the Lazarians built the Lazarian Academy in 1815. It is still a famous Moscow landmark and currently houses the Armenian Embassy and diplomatic mission to the Russian Federation. No matter where they've been, the Nazarians have built churches and schools, and even sponsored the printing of *Explanation of the Book of Psalms* in Venice, in 1687.

The same sort of philanthropy continues today. The Nazarian brothers in Beirut and New Jersey were the donors of the Armenian Embassy building in one of Beirut's most prestigious suburbs. This is fitting, since Arthur's father Garbis Nazarian was the president of AGBU Lebanon District for many years. His uncle Nazar Nazarian has long been the Vice President of AGBU Central Board. The Nazarians are well-known benefactors of Armenian schools, churches and community centers in Lebanon, Argentina, the US and Armenia.

CONNECTIONS

Lebanon's President Emile Lahoud, a general, is half Armenian and is married to an Armenian; that the wife of Health Minister Karam Karam is Armenian as well.

"I believe Armenians are more integrated into society than before. In the past you hardly heard that an Armenian married a Lebanese. But now there are a lot of mixed marriages," says Nazarian.

But he indicates another significant "change" that has taken place in Lebanon since the end of the war. "In general, the Armenian community is widely embraced and accepted by the other religious and ethnic communities in Lebanon. The Armenian community, having lived through the civil war, is seen as part and parcel of Lebanon like any other community. The Armenian community in Lebanon is a permanent community."

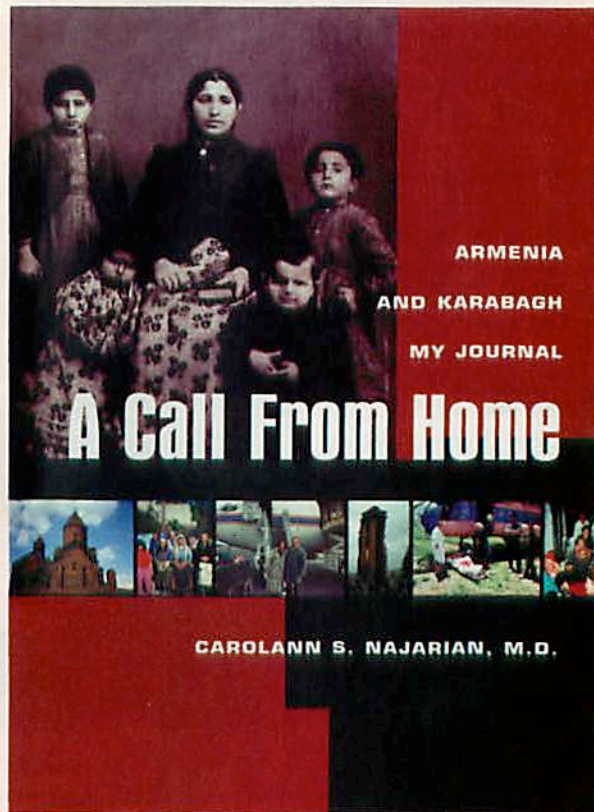
In the past Armenians also played a significant role in Lebanon's economy. "Before the war, most of the factories in Lebanon used to be owned by Armenians, but that has changed since the war," observes Nazarian. Hundreds of Armenian businessmen emigrated or lost their assets in Lebanon since the mid-1970s. Today, Armenians have much smaller role in the economy, however, there is increase in involvement in professional careers.

Nazarian is cautiously optimistic about Lebanon's future as it is related to the future of the entire region. "A peace settlement with Israel will make things better," he says. Since Lebanon is not a major exporting country, regional peace and stability is a must he adds. "The economic prosperity and stability of the Gulf and Arab countries greatly reflect and impact Lebanon's economy. So far one of the greatest source of revenue for Lebanon has been the financial input of Lebanese expatriates around the world."

As for the Armenian community in Lebanon, Nazarian is enthusiastic in his observation. "I believe we are advancing and giving a lot more to society than anytime before and that's a very good sign. Our presence is felt in Lebanon. We are proud of being Armenians at the same time very proud to be Lebanese. Until Armenia's independence, the Lebanese might have thought that Armenians would eventually 'return' to their homeland, but now they know that Armenians are part of the Lebanese social and cultural landscape. It is a permanent community. This is our country, despite the fact that the whole world is open before us." ■

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