

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.SI-1.55>

THE CATHOLICOSATE OF THE GREAT HOUSE OF CILICIA AND THE EMIGRATION OF ARMENIANS FROM THE SANJAK OF ALEXANDRETTA

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Following the Genocide of 1939, Armenians saw the biggest emigration from the Sanjak of Alexandretta. Over 30.000 displaced emigrants settled mostly in the territory of Syria and Lebanon. This process was predominantly regulated by the Catholicosate of Cilicia. The article highlights the organization of the emigration of the Armenians of the Sanjak and the role of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in this work.

Keywords: *The Sanjak of Alexandretta, the Catholicosate of The Great House of Cilicia, Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Allowance Central Commission, exile, emigration.*

Introduction: The Armenians in the Sanjak of Alexandretta before 1939

Due to its geographical location, the Sanjak of Alexandretta has been of an exceptional strategic importance since ancient times. The celebrated Ruben Ter-Minasyan justly calls it “a land Dardanelles” (Stepanyan, 2014, pp. 277-288).

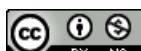
Armenians settled in the territory of the Sanjak of Alexandretta in ancient times. According to one of the records sent by Archbishop Babken Gulessarian to the Head of the National delegation Gabriel Noratunkyan in August 1923, the number of the Armenians in Alexandretta totalled to 27,731, about half of whom – 1,384 were emigrants from Cilicia and other parts of Armenia (The Archives of The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, Vol. 22, List. 1, Book 196, page 8; *The National Archives of Armenia* (NAA), Stock 430, List. 1, Doc 802, page 8). Based on the data provided by the field commission of the National League, the

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Received: 25.04.2025

Revised: 23.06.2025

Accepted: 26.06.2025



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Sanjak of Alexandretta had 220.000 inhabitants, 85,000 of whom were Turks, 64,000 – Alawites, 22,000 – other Muslims including Arabs, Kurds, Cherkezes, and 18,000 Christians. The number of Armenians reached 27,000 (The Hask, 1939, N 7-8, p.124; Sanjian, 1956, pp. 379-394).

According to the official census held in 1936, the Armenian population of the Sanjak of Alexandretta totalled to 28,857, i.e. about 13% of the local general population (Bairamyan, 1964, p. 28). A. Bairamyan states, with reference to facts, that the overall number of the Armenians was far more, around 43,000. This also includes the 5-6,000 Armenian Catholics and Protestants in Sanjak who were often not included in the official number by foreigners. That is to say, the Armenians made up 18% of the general population (ibid, pp. 18; 29-36; 188).

In addition to a number of foreign political groups and parties, the Sanjak was also home for three Armenian traditional parties, the AGBU local structures, as well as *The People's Front of the Armenians in Syria* that was established in Aleppo in 1936 and was fighting to preserve the Sanjak in Syria (Bairamyan, 1964, pp. 32-33).

The Holy See of Cilicia played an underlying role in the national-spiritual life of the Armenians living in the Sanjak of Alexandretta in general, and in the territory around Musa Dagh in particular (Gushagchean; Mătărean, 1970, p. 466).

The Meeting of the Bishops in Antelias at the initiative of the Catholicos of Cilicia Sahak B Khapanyan on March 8-14, 1932, made a decision to annex the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the sub-districts of Antioch and Svedia that belonged to the Diocese of Aleppo to that of Latakia and name the newly re-formed diocese with its historical name – the Diocese of Antioch (The Hask, 1932, N2). Aside from the Armenian Apostolic Church (Shemmassian, 2023, pp. 277-320), Armenian Catholic and Evangelical Churches also operated in the territory of Sanjak (Shemmassian, 2022, pp. 73-96).

Handing the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey

On the threshold of WWII, in addition to military preparations, the great powers tried to ensure the support or at least, the neutral position of certain states through diplomacy.

The Sanjak of Alexandretta, according to the French, was to be the price of “Turkey’s silence.” Since 1921, when France handed Cilicia to Ankara in accordance with the Treaty of Ankara signed on October 20 (Martirosyan, 2021, pp. 53-55), the latter had not abandoned its aspirations for the Sanjak of Alexandretta, especially owing to the fact that the special form of governance applied in the Sanjak contributed to it to some extent.¹ Both the powers and the

local nations have always had their own “interests” (Ter-Minasyan, 2023, pp. 477-515), as Ruben Ter-Minasyan describes, in the Sanjak of Alexandretta, in general, and in the whole of the region, in particular.

The new legal status granted to the territory by the League of Nations in 1938 proved an important step towards joining the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey which presupposed the establishment of a semi-independent state by the guarantee of France and Turkey (Bairamyan, 1998, pp. 110-115).

Most importantly, Europeans regarded the legal status of the Sanjak as “ideal”, while others believed that it “was to become the Switzerland of the Asia Minor” (The Hask, 1939, N7-8, p. 124; Eghiayan, 1975, p. 499).

This status was acceptable for the Armenian circles, as well. However, nearly two decades after surviving the Armenian Genocide (Kevorkian, 2011, pp. 605-613), the Armenians of the Sanjak were forced to emigrate again.

In September 1938, the pro-Turkish authorities of the Sanjak declared the so-called Independent State of Hatay (Hale, 2013, p. 50). This was followed by a request of the Parliament of the Sanjak to Ankara to unite it with Turkey. On July 5, 1939, the Turkish Army entered the territory of the Sanjak (Eghiayan, 1975, p. 500).

Though France, which controlled Syria under the mandate system, did not have the right to hand over any of the territories of Syria to a foreign country, guided by its own geopolitical interests, presented the Sanjak of Alexandretta that belonged to Syria to Turkey by the French-Turkish Treaty on June 23, 1939 (Hale, 2013, p. 51; Bairamyan, 1998, pp. 146-148).

Under the Treaty, the minority nations in the Sanjak were given 6 months to choose between Turkish or Syrian and Lebanese citizenship. The ones who would choose a non-Turkish citizenship, would be granted 18 months after the withdrawal of the French troops to solve their property-related issues (The Hask, 1939, N7-8, p. 124). The Turkish law on “abandoned properties” had been in force in the Sanjak for already a year. Since the non-Turkish population of the Sanjak had decided to leave the area together with the French troops, i.e. nearly a month after the notorious treaty was signed, they did not have the opportunity to use the time limit of 18 months set by the Treaty and organize the sale of their own properties. The local Armenians and their leaders were quite conscious of all this (Nersissean, 2015, pp. 186-187).

In June, 1939, the representatives of the Armenian national and religious authorities - Co-Adjutor Catholicos of Cilicia Bedros Sarajian, Co-Adjutor Catholicos of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate Piere Ketetchyan, the Armenian Deputies of Alexandretta Khosrov Tutunjyan, Movses Ter-Galustyan and other

spiritual and secular representatives addressed the High Commissioner of France in Lebanon and Syria Gabriel Puaux to permit the Armenians to move to Lebanon (Nersissean 2015, pp. 186-187).

Thus, due to the short-sighted policy of France, the Sanjak of Alexandretta was handed over to Turkey. Even the dissatisfaction among the French people (Eghiayean, 1975, p. 502) did not make the French authorities review the decision.

Efforts of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia and the Armenian circles to “save” the Sanjak of Alexandretta

Two or three years prior to the surrender of the Sanjak of Alexandretta there were already rumors about the deal. Back in 1925 foreseeing the future developments, Archbishop Babken Gulessarian hinted about it in one of his letters addressed to Catholicos of Cilicia Sahak B (The Archives of The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 1999, N1, p. 50).

The Armenian circles did their best to prevent this initiative that was most dangerous for Armenians. Together with other Armenian organizations and different churches, the Catholicosate of Cilicia played a central role in the protection of the interests of the local Armenian community. Antelias addressed officially to the representatives of both the local and French authorities, as well as the League of Nations. However, sadly, the fate of the Sanjak was sealed for a long time.

Archbishop Bedros Sarajian left for Mets Sara – the residence of the High Commissioner of France on June 23, 1938, to get information from the French authorities in person, as well as to express the resentment of Antelias over the matter. Traditionally, the relations between the Catholicosate of Cilicia and the French local authorities of Syria were quite warm and friendly. This time, however, Archbishop Bedros was obliged to wait for the meeting with the High Commissioner longer than usual. He was finally received by the representative of the High Commissioner who explained this by the busy schedule of the latter. He also assured the Archbishop that they would not leave the Sanjak of Alexandretta or at least would have a military presence to protect the minorities (The Hask, 1938, N7-8, p. 121). The representative of the High Commissioner turned down the request of the Archbishop to visit the Sanjak himself and pacify the people. The representative explained his rejection by the absence of any instruction from the High Commissioner to do so and promised to give a more complete answer on a later occasion (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, the permission was never granted (Eghiayean, 1975, p. 503).

On March 24, 1939, the newly appointed High Commissioner of France in Lebanon and Syria Gabriel Puaux paid his first visit to Antelias (The Hask, 1939, N2, pp. 59-61). The question about the Armenians in Sanjak was raised again (the Hask, 1939, N4, p. 61).

The Catholicosate of Cilicia had its own vision on the possible solution to the problem of Sanjak. However, unfortunately, neither the Catholicosate of Cilicia, nor the Armenian community had enough power and the necessary levers to impose solutions that would favor Armenians.

Nonetheless, due to the persistent efforts of the Catholicosate of Cilicia, the Armenian Commission in Paris and the so-called Mediterranean Committee,² it was possible to preserve Kessab – a district of the Sanjak in the composition of Syria mostly populated with Armenians (Bairamyan, 1998, p. 148).

Depopulation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta and the efforts of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia to accommodate the emigrants

The emigration of the Armenians of the Sanjak started back in 1937. 12-13,000 out of the 30,000 local Armenians had already left prior to the summer of 1939 (Eghiayan, 1975, p. 505). Later, around 50,000 representatives of different ethnic groups, including about 15,000 Armenians, 10,000 Alawites, 10,000 Arabs, 5,000 Christian Arabs left the Sanjak and moved to Syria and Lebanon (Demir, 2017, p. 41).

The French had formed a commission to organize the emigration and find accommodation for the emigrants. ARF member Movses Ter-Galustyan was the representative of Armenians in the commission. The Holy See of Cilicia, which had undergone a long process of re-structuring after leaving Sis in 1921 (Hovhannisyan, 2022, pp. 1274-1287), had an undeniable role in the organization of the emigration of the Armenians of the Sanjak.

The emigration started on July 17 and lasted a week, until July 23 – the date of the withdrawal of the French Army (The Hask, 1939, N7-8, p. 125). Initially, the Armenian emigration was envisaged to take place after the French troops had left the area. However, the Holy See of Cilicia turned to the French authorities with a request to be given a permission to organize the emigration before the withdrawal of the French army, since there was no guarantee that the Armenians would not be subjected to physical persecution after the French had left.

The emigration took place both by land and by sea. The free transportation of the Armenians by land was organized by Armenian owners of trucks and lorries in Syria and Lebanon. At first, the Armenian emigrants found temporary shelter in three central camps.

1. The Armenian population of Girk-Khan, Rohanie, Hayashen and other settlements of the field areas of the Sanjak, around 3000 people in total, arrived at Aleppo camp by land.
2. The Armenian population from the area surrounding Musa Dagh, around 6000 people, settled in coastline Basit, at 55 kilometres' distance from Latakia.
3. The Armenians from the city of Alexandretta and the surrounding mountainous villages, 3750 people in total, arrived in the area near Tartous by sea (*ibid*, p. 125).

The representatives of the Catholicosate See of Cilicia immediately visited the refugee camps. Bedros Sarajian, Co-Adjutor Catholicos of Cilicia visited the immigration camps on July 22-26, 1939 (*ibid*).

The last group of the Armenian emigrants – 135 people in total, arrived in Beirut from Alexandretta on October 7 together with the Leader of the Antioch Diocese Khad. Arch. Ajapahian. The latter also brought the property and utensils of the abandoned church of the Sanjak (*The Hask*, 1939, N 9-10, p. 138). The Armenians who were forced to leave the Sanjak were not able to sell their real estate even at a cheaper price. The government and local authorities had ordered Turks to refrain from buying the properties of Armenians with a hope to get hold of them free of charge later on (*The Heradzayn*, 1939, N147, p. 1).

Several families from the Armenian villages around the Musa Dagh decided to stay (Shemmassian, 2015, p.279; National Archives of Armenia, Stock. 1394, Lit 1, Doc. 224, page 1). The Vicar of Vakef was among them. Most of them decided to live in the village of Vakef. The Holy See of Cilicia undertook the assistance of the Armenians leaving the Sanjak and the ones who had already emigrated (about 30.000) (*The Hask*, 1939, N 9-10, p. 138). On the very first day of the immigration Priest Zareh Palasyan was sent by Antelias to Latakia and Tartous to cooperate with the commissions engaged in accommodating the immigrants and to inform Antelias about the proceedings. Other high-ranking clergymen also visited the Refugee Camps (*The Hask*, 1939, N 7-8, p. 125; *the Hask*, 1941, N 7-8, p. 119).

The growing popularity of the Catholicosate of Cilicia and the trust it enjoyed among the immigrants was the main reason why the AGBU Central Department suggested that the Catholicos of Cilicia Sahak B should head the commission founded to support the immigrants which was to organize fund-raising events (Eghiayan, 1975, p. 502).

Shortly after, on June 9, 1939, *the Allowance Central Commission* was founded in Beirut under the leadership of Co-Adjutor Catholicos of Cilicia Bedros Sarajian (*The Hask*, 1939, N 7-8, p. 125).³ The aim of the initiative was to

coordinate the assistance provided. The Commission had its local representations in Aleppo, Damascus and Latakia under the supervision of the diocese leader.

Another body – the *National Union* (The Hask, 1939, N 7-8, p. 125) was set up in Beirut by Bedros B Catholicos for the same purpose. Co-Adjutor Catholicos of Cilicia Bedros Ketichyan was also engaged in the work of the union.

The French authorities also provided considerable support to the immigrant Armenians. An office was set up in Mets Sara, near Beirut to deal with the immigration-related problems (The Hask, 1939, N 9-10, p. 140). The French authorities provided each adult immigrant with 500 francs and those under the age – 200 francs. They also covered the transportation costs. The French government bought pieces of land in Anjar and Tyre at the cost of 7 and 2 million francs respectively to build settlements (The Hask, 1940, N 2, p. 30). The houses of immigrants were mostly built by the funds provided by the French government (4. mln 800 thousand francs in total). Another 13 mln francs was allocated to cover various expenses connected with the accommodation of the immigrants in Beirut. It is noteworthy that dozens of families settled in different settlements of Syria and Lebanon (The Hask, 1939, N 9-10, p. 139).

In his letter to the Catholicos of Cilicia, the High Commissioner of Syria suggested that some of the expenses connected with the accommodation of the immigrants, particularly, the construction of houses, should be undertaken by the national bodies (The Zion, N 1, 1940). At that stage the French authorities had initiated the construction of over 1600 houses and it was expected that another 700 ones would be done with the money raised by Armenians (*ibid.*).

It was necessary to organize all-Armenian fund-raising. Hence, the National Union addressed all Armenians with an appeal *Let us help the Emigrants of the Sanjak* (The Hask, 1939, N 7-8).

Fundraising events were also initiated by women, youth, patriotic, religious organizations, national parties, individual newspapers, such as the *Harach* weekly published in Paris which donated 120.000 francs (The Zion, 1939, N 9, p. 339; N 10-11, p. 372).

The AGBU carried out tremendous work to help the emigrants of the Sanjak. In December 1939, the AGBU created Emergency Central Commission to raise funds in Paris (The Zion, 1939, N9). The charitable organization and the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party launched fundraising in the USA with the slogan “One Dollar Wheat.” The money raised was again handed over to the leadership of the Holy See of Cilicia (The Hask, 1939, N 7-8, p. 125; the Zartorq, 1940, N 916).

Shortly afterwards the charitable organization initiated the nationwide fund-raising (*The Hask*, 1939, N 11-12, p.178). This included other Armenian colonies, too (*The Hask*, 1939, N 9-10, pp. 140-141).

The management of the money raised was entrusted to the Catholicosate of Cilicia... “It is with great gratitude that we note that the work of accommodating Armenian emigrants was carried out by the Armenian Diaspora with the active participation of all the national and friendly institutions. From North America to France, Egypt, Palestine and Iraq – Armenians across the whole world participated in the efforts of the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon with their monetary contrabutions (*ibid.*)’ *the Hask* wrote about the pan-Armenian fundraising. The newly appointed Catholicos of Cilicia Bedros Sarajian also spoke about it in his first and only pastoral letter (*The Hask*, 1940, N 6,7,8, p. 85).

On September 4-14, 1205 families from the villages around Musa Dagh – 5125 people in total moved to Anjar (*The Hask*, 1939, N 9-10, p.138). The emigrants had to live in tents until the flats provided by the National Union of Beirut were ready (*ibid.* p. 39). Special places were provided for Armenian churches with different religious directions, as well as for all-male and all-female colleges (*The Hask*, 1940, N2, p. 30).

The other refugee camp, as already stated, was to be stationed in the coastline area near the historical city of Tyre (*ibid.*). 280 Armenian families who had moved from Tartous to Beirut (around 3100 emigrants) settled here and engaged in farming, (*The Hask*, 1939, N 9-10, p. 139). Some other emigrants from the Sanjak settled in the suburbs of Beirut.

The Catholicosate of Cilicia, together with other institutions, initiated the organization of the emigrant children’s education. At first, the children attended different national colleges (*The Hask*, 1940, N 2, p.31), then a temporary college was set up in Tyre, in the territory of the Greek orthodox church. The salary of the two Armenian teachers working here was paid by the AGBU. The rest of the expenses was covered by Antelias. Efforts were made to set up a tent school in Anjar (*The Hask*, 1940, N 2, p. 32). Two years later, there were already two colleges operating in Ras al-Ayn Camp and one in Anjar, Tripoli and Latakia with the support of the Allowance Commission (*The Hask*, 1941, N 5-6, p. 79).

The Allowance Central Commission also created a Health Care Mission (*The Zartonq*, 1940, N 958). A hospital was opened in Anjar and Tyre each with 25 and 12 beds respectively. Each refugee camp also had a pharmacy where medicine could be obtained free of charge (*The Hask*, 1940, N 2, p. 31).

Malaria remained a big problem in Anjar (*The Hask*, 1942, N7-8, p. 156). Due to the complex measures taken, the spread of malaria considerably declined in

1943. Medical and dental clinics operated in Syria and Lebanon on volunteer basis through the means provided by the AGBU (The Hask, 1944, N5-6-7, p. 102).

At the initiative of American benefactors of Armenian origin Arshak and Mihran Karagozyans, free child-care centers after Howard Karagozyan were set up in Beirut and Anjar in 1940 (The Hask, 1944, N11-12, pp. 170-171).

Due to all these measures, the death rate among the immigrants reduced considerably (The Hask, 1940, N 2, p. 31).

The supply of food was a serious problem among the immigrants in need. A series of important steps were taken in this regard as well (*ibid.*).

The whole process was controlled by the Holy See of Cilicia. The visits of the representatives of Antelias and the high-ranking clergy to the refugee camps were frequent. During these visits they recorded the work that had already been carried out. The remaining problems were also paid close attention to. The clergy communicated with the people and performed liturgies on the spot (The Hask 1940, N 5, p. 80; N 9,10, p. 124.; 1941, N7-8, p. 118-119; 1942, N 7-8, p. 122). Antelias often turned to the French authorities, the AGBU and other charitable organizations to help solve the problems recorded (The Hask 1941, N 3-4, p. 54).

Conclusion

WWII did not give a chance to organize the accommodation problem of the immigrants properly and the latter were obliged to solve many of them themselves.

Nevertheless, the AGBU Allowance Central Commission, led by the Catholicosate of Cilicia carried out tremendous work during the six and a half years of its activity – from 1939 to 1945 (Eghiayean, 1975, pp. 555-556).

In the course of its activity, it conducted projects amounting to 1 mln 200.000 Syrian banknotes or 600.000 US dollars. One-third of this money came from the transfers of the relatives of the immigrants settled in Syria and Lebanon who lived abroad, and the two-thirds – came from the money raised (The Hask 1941, N7-8, p. 120; Eghiayean, 1975, p. 556).

It was due to the supervision of the Holy See of Cilicia and the combined efforts of all Armenians across the world that the emigration and the resettlement of the emigrants of the Sanjak of Alexandretta in Syria and Lebanon were possible to organize with as little loss as possible – something that had not been possible during the depopulation of Cilicia 18 years before.

In the years that followed the Catholicosate of Cilicia continued supporting the newly founded Armenian towns and especially the educational institutions founded in these places (The Hask, 1942, N1-2, p. 29).

Thus, the whole process of the emigration of the Sanjak Armenians and their resettlement was predominantly coordinated by the Catholicosate of Cilicia with the support of the national organizations and French institutions.

Notes

1. For more details about the international diplomatic struggle over the Sanjak of Alexandretta see also Bairamyan A., *The Issue of the Sanjak of Alexandretta and International Diplomacy in 1936-1939*, Yerevan 1998.
2. The International Committee included the French state and public figures, Members of the Senate, former officials and high-ranking militarymen who were against handing the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey and launched a vibrant struggle against the French authorities of the time with the help of this committee. The Armenian organizations and Armenian figures greatly contributed to the work of the Committee.
3. For more information about the members of this commission, see Eghiyayan B. *Contemporary History of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia 1914-1972*, Antelias, 1975, 506 p.

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Էղքար Հովհաննիսյան

1939 թ. Յեղասպանությունից հետո տեղի ունեցավ հայության ամենամեծ զաղթը Ալքեսանդրետի սանչակի տարածքից: Շուրջ 30 հազար տարագիր զաղթականներ հիմնականում հաստատվեցին Սիրիայի և Լիբանանի տարածքում: Այդ գործընթացը հիմնականում համակարգեց Մեծի Տանն Կիլիկիո կաթողիկոսությունը: Հոդվածում քննարկվում է Սանչակի հայության զաղթի կազմակերպման գործընթացը և Կիլիկիո կաթողիկոսության դերակատարումն այդ հարցում:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Ալեքսանդրետի սանչակ, Մեծի Տանն Կիլիկիո կաթողիկոսությունը, Հայկական բարեգործական ընդհանուր միություն, Նպաստից կենտրոնական հանձնախումբ, տարագրություն, զաղթականություն: