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Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese Claims to Whiteness in Post-War Canadian Immigration Policy

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Abstract

This article asks how, in early post-World War II Canada, Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese communities claimed whiteness in the context of Canada's racially restrictive immigration regulations that defined them as "Asiatics," and hence inadmissible. But, it also examines how Canadian politicians and immigration bureaucrats responded to those claims. Using so-far untapped archival records, this article shows that immigration authorities were unwilling to redefine the racial status of these groups out of fear that doing so would provide a wedge for other groups of "Asiatics" to press for the ability to migrate to Canada. In this case, Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese could be regarded as experiencing collateral damage in the politics of whiteness. While Canadian immigration authorities seemed to privately accept the white/European identity claims of these groups, they were nonetheless unwilling to publicly grant them one of the privileges of whiteness – namely the ability to migrate to Canada on a basis equal to that of other white immigrants. Instead, the government used "merit-based" orders-in-council as an under the radar administrative mechanism to admit members of these groups. This allowed the government and the immigration department to avoid a larger public debate about racial discrimination against "Asiatic" immigrants.

Keywords: Canada; Syrians; Armenians; Lebanese; immigration

Introduction

In Canada, the twenty years following World War II constitute a transition period between the explicitly and unabashedly racialized immigration system that had been built before the war, and the official de-racialization of the immigration system that began in the mid-1960s (Satzewich 2021). As racism and racial discrimination came increasingly discredited both internationally and domestically after the war, the emergent abhorrence of racism bumped up against an immigration system that remained grounded in the political dynamics and ideologies of the early 20th century, where racialized understandings of who constituted a good immigrant continued to shape policies and practices about who ought to be admitted. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Canadian immigration officials went through extraordinary intellectual and policy contortions to publicly profess that immigration policy and practice were not racist or racially discriminatory, but at the same time to continue to favor white immigrants and control and limit the arrival of various racialized groups defined as undesirable and/or unassimilable.

In a context where Canada's racially restrictive pre-war immigration regulations defined Syrians, Armenians, and the Lebanese as "Asiatics," and hence as inadmissible to the country, this article asks two questions: 1) How did these groups already living in Canada claim whiteness in the early

post-World War II years in order for co-ethnics to be defined as admissible to the country? 2) How did immigration bureaucrats and influential politicians respond to these efforts?

This article uses a so-far untapped archival fond¹ that contains various letters, petitions, government reports, and internal and external government correspondence regarding Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese community members claims to whiteness and being of European “racial stock.” It shows that even though some senior Liberal politicians and immigration bureaucrats were sympathetic to community members claims to whiteness, other immigration authorities were nonetheless not willing to publicly exempt them from broader restrictions on “Asiatic” immigration. In order to avoid public debate about the ongoing system of racialized immigration control and potentially open the door to immigration from Asia, immigration authorities made use of individual based orders-in-council that allowed them to circumvent a broader exclusionary policy that targeted immigrants from Asia. These orders-in-council were not politically visible to the broader Canadian population, and as such, the immigration department seemed to privately accept their claims to whiteness. At the same time, they were not willing to publicly redefine their status as “Asiatic” because of fears that this would provide a wedge for other groups of so-called “Asiatics” to claim the opportunity to migrate to Canada.

The article demonstrates that a group’s successful claiming of whiteness is not simply about their using the logic of racialized science to renegotiate their place in racialized structures; it also depends on the interests of the state officials who are responsible for evaluating and enforcing those claims. State officials who evaluate those claims and, in essence, officially grant the status of whiteness (Backhouse 1999), also account for the interests of other groups that also seek to potentially cross racial lines. In this case, Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese experienced collateral damage in the politics of whiteness at the time.

Racialization and the Canadian Post-War Immigration Dilemma

The allies’ victory over Nazi Germany in World War II marked a turning point in much of the world’s understanding of and approach to racism, discrimination, and international human rights norms (Montagu 1964). The atrocities committed by the Nazi regime against Jews and other racialized others under the guise of biological race science shook much of the world and “constituted a ‘critical juncture’ of the highest order in the history of membership politics in liberal democratic states” (Triadafilopoulos 2012, 56). The fallout from the war gave rise to a normative international context that emphasized equality, human rights, anti-racism, and self-determination. Racist ideologies and associated discriminatory treatment, which were common and largely seen as unproblematic in many other liberal democratic countries before the war, became increasingly politically indefensible, at least at the international level (FitzGerlad and Martin 2014).

But as noted by Triadafilopoulos (2012) and others (Knowles 1992; Kelly and Trebilcock 2010; FitzGerlad and Cook-Martin 2014), the changing international narrative about biological race and racism created certain tensions, contractions, and dilemmas for immigrant-receiving countries such as Canada that had built their pre-war immigration policies and practices on racist foundations. Though ordinary Canadians and political elites may have been horrified by the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime in the name of race science during the war, many seemed unprepared to completely kick racist ideologies and racially discriminatory practices to the curb when it came to deciding who was a suitable immigrant (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin 2014). As previous research has amply demonstrated, Canada’s immigration related response to the emerging anti-racist international normative order was contradictory (Satzewich 1991; Elrick 2021; Triadafilopoulos 2012). In many ways, it remained ideologically rooted in pre-war understandings of who were good immigrants while at the same time being extraordinarily sensitive when it came to defending itself against accusations that its immigration policies were discriminatory against certain races. When it came to immigration, Canadian authorities continued to

insist that they not only had the right to control their international borders, but also that it was perfectly reasonable to select immigrants who were racially and culturally more likely to assimilate into the country (Hawkins 1988).

The broad contours of post-war Canadian racialized immigration policy are well known. Prime Minister Mackenzie King's oft-quoted statement in the House of Commons in 1947 set the tone for much of Canada's approach to immigration until the early 1960s. Documented in pages 2644–2646 of the House of Commons Debates, King argued that

there will, I am sure, be general agreement with the view that the people of Canada do not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to make a fundamental alteration in the character of our population. Large scale immigration from the orient would change the fundamental composition of the Canadian population. Any considerable oriental immigration would, moreover, be certain to give rise to social and economic problems of a character that might lead to serious difficulties in the field of international relations. The government, therefore, has not thought of making any change in immigration regulations that would have consequence of the kind.

As implied by Mackenzie King's specific concerns about "immigration from the orient," managing Asian immigration proved to be one of the most vexing challenges faced by Canadian immigration bureaucrats and politicians during the early post-war years. Provincial politicians in British Columbia were at the forefront of Asian exclusion initiatives before the war (Roy 1989; Sage 1926), and they remained so when it ended. In a nod to concerns about racial discrimination tainting the country's international reputation, immigration authorities eliminated blatantly racially discriminatory policies from some of their public facing policies, but at the same time created administrative measures that would prevent the large-scale arrival in Canada of Asian (and Black) immigrants. The 1923 Chinese Immigration Act, which barred almost all Chinese immigration to Canada, was rescinded in 1947 (Li 1988; Price 2012), as was the 1908 "Continuous Journey Regulation," which effectively prevented the landing in Canada of south Asians (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava 1985). Thus, rather than completely opening the doors to immigrants from China and India, immigration authorities relied on restrictive measures that were still discriminatory, but were somewhat easier to politically defend against accusations of racism. In 1947, it allowed a limited family reunification migration from China for family members that had been forcibly separated since 1923 (Li 1988), and in 1952, it created a quota system for new immigrants who wanted to move from south Asia to Canada: 150 new immigrants from India, 100 from Pakistan, and 50 from Ceylon (Bolaria and Li 1988, 173; Macklin 2011). These limited admissibility measures allowed Canadian authorities to deflect accusations that its immigration policy was racially discriminatory. In other words, they could point to the quotas and limited family reunification as evidence that Asian immigrants were not barred from entering Canada.

Despite the slight opening of the door to Asian immigration through these limited measures, the general policy towards Asian immigration remained restrictive (Lee 1976). During the early post-war years, Canadian immigration authorities remained committed to limiting large-scale immigration from Asia, and the policy tool that empowered immigration authorities to achieve that end was Order-in-Council P.C. 2115, which was approved by the Cabinet on September 16, 1930. P.C. 2115 stated that

the landing in Canada of any immigrant of any Asiatic race is hereby prohibited, except as hereinafter provided:

The Immigration Officer-in-Charge may admit any immigration who otherwise complies with the provisions of the Immigration Act, if it is shown to his satisfaction that such immigrant is,—

The wife or unmarried child under 18 years of age, of any Canadian citizen legally admitted to and resident in Canada, who is in a position to receive and care for his dependents. (*Anti-Chinese Immigration Laws in Canada, 1885–1967*, n.d.)

The government's continued commitment to upholding P.C. 2115, coupled with its definition of Asia as "almost everything in the Eastern hemisphere outside of Europe" (Hawkins 1988, 94), meant that Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese peoples remained caught up in the blanket exclusion of members of the "the Asiatic race." The only exceptions were the wives and unmarried children under 18 of Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese who had managed to enter Canada before P.C. 115 took effect in 1930.

Small numbers of Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese managed to migrate to Canada before the introduction of P.C. 2115–1930. The first migrants arrived from the Ottoman Empire, more specifically from Greater Syria, including Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Turkey. This wave consisted primarily of Syrians and Lebanese Christians who settled in Montreal beginning in the early 1880s. The migration of Syrian and Lebanese peaked in the period between 1900 and 1909, with an annual average of 600 admitted migrants, though the number quickly reduced to less than 150 annual entries due to the application of the "continuous journey rule," which specified that overseas immigrants had to travel to Canada via one continuous sea journey from their country of origin. Though the continuous journey rule was originally crafted to prevent immigration to Canada from India, it was also applied more broadly to immigration from Asia, including the *Mashreq*, the entire Arab region surrounding Syria, making it difficult for Syrians and Lebanese to migrate to the country (Asal 2020).

The first Armenians to migrate to Canada were men from the Ottoman Empire who fled persecution and massacres in Turkey targeted at the non-Muslim population. They arrived in the 1880s and settled primarily in Ontario. There were around 1,800 Armenians in Canada even before the Armenian genocide of 1915; and between 1915 and 1930, less than 1,300 survivors of the Armenian genocide in Turkey were admitted to Canada (Kelley and Trebilcock 2010). Between 1900 and 1930, approximately 3,100 Armenians entered Canada in total (Chichekian 1977). The majority of Armenians settled in Ontario, while some 20 percent resided in Quebec (Canada n.d.).

As the dust settled from World War II, the early fear that demobilized members of the Canadian armed forces would contribute to a surge in unemployment turned out to be unfounded. By late 1946, Canadian officials realized that one of the problems facing Canada was not high unemployment, but a shortage of labor (Satzewich 1991). In that context, the federal government embarked on a path of extensive recruitment of immigrants from Europe, both the traditionally desired white immigrants from the United Kingdom and Northern Europe, but also from southern Europe and from within the ranks of the hundreds of thousands of eastern European displaced persons located in refugee camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy.

Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese Claims to Whiteness, 1946–1948

Representatives of Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese communities in Canada saw this enthusiasm for the recruitment and admission of European immigrants as an opportunity to make the case that they too should be admissible. In so doing, they engaged in a politics of whiteness that sought inclusion as part of the European "race" and distanced themselves from "Asiatics." Lebanese community representatives in the United States appear to have been the first group to engage the Canadian government in a conversation to change the place of the Lebanese in Canadian immigration regulations. On October 12, 1946, the Ambassador of Lebanon in the United States approached Lester Pearson, the Canadian Ambassador to the United States and future Prime Minister of Canada. In his letter to Pearson, the Lebanese Ambassador, Charles Malik, suggested that since "the whole question of immigration is under review in Canada," it was an opportune

moment to address what he regarded as a longstanding wrong in Canadian immigration policy: the definition of the Lebanese as “Asiatic.”²

What I only want to say is that it is unfair morally and incorrect scientifically to classify our people with the Asiatics in general. The Lebanese people are thoroughly Mediterranean like any other Mediterranean people. Racially they have nothing whatsoever to do with the Japanese or Chinese. There are several thousand of them in Canada, and from every report I get they are thoroughly law-abiding, loyal and industrious citizens. They are perfectly assimilable to the basic Canadian stock.³

He went on to explain that “Western European civilization, of which the Canadian is but an offshoot started on our shores, when our sailors in the Phoenician period colonized and civilized all the Southern coasts of Europe.”⁴

It would seem odd, therefore, that the existing people who are culturally, spiritually and genetically related, by a continuous lineal descent, to the very people of old who produced the most sacred values in Western civilization should be indiscriminately lumped together with the whole of Asia by such an authentic branch of that civilization as Canada. Religiously, racially or culturally we are for the most part like the Greeks or Italians or Spaniards.⁵

At the time, the Lebanese Ambassador did not seem to think that aligning with the Syrian and Armenian communities in Canada was useful or necessary when it came to lobbying efforts. The Ambassador, sympathetic to Canada’s dilemma about restricting Asiatic immigration, explained that “I fully understand that a line must be drawn somewhere, but regarding our history as well as our actual structure, I am sure any ethnologist will draw that line west [*sic. east*] of Lebanon.”⁶

Pearson’s response is not available in the archival record, but seven months later, on May 7, 1947, the Consul of Lebanon in Canada, wrote directly to Louis St. Laurent, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, and submitted a copy of the same letter written a year earlier by the Lebanese Ambassador to Pearson. M. J. Tabet, Consul of Lebanon in Ottawa, asked again that Canadian immigration law “should differentiate the people of Lebanese origin from the category of Asiatic races.”⁷

By this time, Pearson had been summoned back to Canada by Mackenzie King to become the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs. Pearson seemed sympathetic to the claims of the Lebanese representatives in Canada and the United States that they were not “Asiatic.” This sensitivity likely stemmed from his time as Canadian representative at the United Nations in 1945, when matters of race and racial discrimination were front and center because of the link between Nazi racial theories and the Holocaust. Pearson was acutely aware of the awkward position that Canada was in by simultaneously condemning the racism associated with Nazism, but at the same time having an explicitly racially exclusionary immigration policy. He wrote to Hugh Keenleyside, the Deputy Minister of Immigration, on June 17, 1947, gently arguing that

There is a good deal to be said for the argument of the Lebanese that the use of term “Asiatic race” is misleading, if it is to be interpreted in a geographical rather than ethnological sense. I should be glad to know whether you can see any change in wording that might be properly introduced that might have a clearer meaning?⁸

Pearson recognized that the Prime Minister, in his May 1947 statement in the House of Commons on immigration, “indicated that the government has no intention of removing existing regulations respecting Asiatic immigration unless and until alternative measures of effective control have been worked out.”⁹ His solution was to float the idea of “a special agreement with Lebanon for the control of admission on a basis of complete equality and reciprocity.”¹⁰ In order to get past accusations of racial discrimination, Pearson raised the possibility of entering into reciprocal immigration

agreements with various countries that would involve mutually agreed upon quotas for nationals of each country to move to the other. This idea was disingenuous at best, given that it is doubtful whether many Canadians were interested in migrating to Lebanon after World War II. It appears to have been quickly dismissed by immigration bureaucrats. After this dismissal, Pearson stopped contributing to the subsequent debates on this matter, likely because, as Minister of External Affairs, he was preoccupied with other matters, including Canada's joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization 1949.

In the spring of 1947, Syrian- and Armenian-Canadians, also independently of each other, sought to renegotiate their individual group racial status. On March 6, 1947, members of the Syrian Canadian Association, led by Montreal barrister and solicitor, Joseph Helal, met with A. L. Jolliffe, the Director of Immigration Branch, to advance their case that Syrians ought not be defined as part of the Asiatic race from the perspective of immigration regulations. According to Helal's account of that meeting, Jolliffe "submitted to me a very pertinent question.... 'where I would propose the line should be drawn in Asia to cover peoples of the white race?'"¹¹

Helal admitted that "I was not prepared for such a difficult question, nor was I prepared to answer questions concerning Iraq, Iran and India."¹² He nevertheless correctly surmised that it was driven by the Immigration Branch's concern that opening up the immigration regulations to allow for the redefinition of the racial status of Syrians would create "numerous other problems from other white races situated in Asia."¹³ Even though they were caught off guard at the meeting with Jolliffe, Helal and the Syrian Canadian Association nonetheless took Jolliffe's question seriously. A month later, Helal submitted a detailed response as part of the Association's "Petition of Syrian Canadian Associations, and the words 'Asiatic Race' in the Immigration Act and P.C.'s."¹⁴ But instead of channeling the petition back through Jolliffe, Helal sent it directly to the Minister of Mines and Resources, J. Allison Glen. Glen was the newly appointed Minister, and Helal must have thought that it would get a more sympathetic hearing with him rather than what must have appeared to be an obstructionist immigration bureaucrat. Helal's petition took a three-pronged strategy: first, he cited Canadian legal precedent; second, he cited the state-of-the-art scientific knowledge about race at the time, as represented in *Encyclopaedia Americana* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; and third, he discussed American policy and legal precedent about where Syrians fit into that country's system of racial categorization, and definition of who was white.

The legal precedent cited by Helal involved a restrictive covenant case in 1930 in southwestern Ontario that revolved around the question of whether a person of Syrian origin could legally purchase a property whose ownership and transfer were otherwise restricted to Caucasians. In his summary of the case, Helal noted that the

Plaintiff has sold a property with the restriction 'that the lands shall not be sold to or occupied by persons not of the Caucasian race nor to Europeans, except such as are of English-speaking countries and the French and the people of French descent.' Defendant having resold the property to Naklie, a Syrian, Plaintiff took action to set the Deed aside.¹⁵

Racialized restrictive covenants were common in Canada before they were ruled discriminatory in the late 1940s (Harris 2004). Most of the covenants pertained to restrictions on the sale of property to Jews, "negroes," and others defined as either "non-Caucasian" or "not European." This covenant was different insofar as it disallowed the sale of property to those who were not "Caucasian" and to Europeans who were not of "English speaking countries" and "the French and people of French descent."¹⁶ In effect, the covenant restricted the sale of property narrowly to "Caucasians" from the United Kingdom or to French Canadians and French immigrants. This covenant was likely unusual for the narrowness of the definition of who could own property and for the exclusion of what John Porter would have called Europeans with "entrance status" (1965, 63). At both the lower court and the Court of Appeal for Ontario, the judges ruled that "these people are all, as are many others, including Syrians and Israelites, members of the so called European race."¹⁷ In Helal's view, since

the Canadian courts ruled that Syrians were in fact members of “the Caucasian race,” the purchase of the property by Naklie was ruled legal (Smit and Valiante 2016).

Helal then went on to educate the Minister about the race science of the day and where Syrians and others from the South Mediterranean fit into prevailing racial typologies.¹⁸ He cited an article on Ethnology from the *Encyclopaedia Americana* that specified the five “main races” of the world.¹⁹ Listed under the thread “Race” ⇒ “European” ⇒ “Branch” ⇒ “South Mediterranean”; “Stock” ⇒ “Semitic”; “Group” ⇒ “Arabian,” Abyssinian, Chaldaean [*sic.*], “(these include the Syrians, Israelites, Sarmatians, Babylonians, and Jews).”²⁰ From the perspective of this racial typology, Syrians were of “Semitic stock” of the larger “European” race. He further quoted the *Americana*’s explanation of who “Semitic” peoples were in cultural terms:

The third group of Semitic peoples has been called the Chaldean. This includes the Syrians, Israelites, Samaritans, Babylonians and Jews. They also originated in Arabia and spread out into other lands. The Jew has become world wise in his dispersal. From these great [*sic.*] nations have developed and from two great religious leaders, Jesus Christ and Mohammed, have sprung.²¹

Americana’s assessment of Syrians’ place as members of the “European race” in the racial cosmology of the time was reinforced by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Helal explained that *Britannica* “also classifies Syrians and Lebanese as Semitic. From the above authorities there is no doubt that Syrians and Lebanese are definitely of the white race, forming part of the European families.”²² He also noted that *Americana* “definitely” did not consider Syrians to be part of the “Asiatic” or “Mongolic race,” and he proceeded to identify for the Minister the groups that “really” fit into that category, including “Chinese,” “Tibetan,” “Indo-Chinese,” “Tunguric,” “Mongolic,” “Tartaric,” “Finnic,” “Arctic” and “Japanic” “stocks.”²³

Finally, Helal explained where Syrians fit into the American racial landscape in general and within its immigration and citizenship policies in particular. He provided a copy of a map originally produced for the United States Immigration Act of 1917 that delimited the “Asiatic exclusion zone.” That Act was controversial in the United States largely because it introduced a literacy test for every immigrant over the age of 16, even if they were from a European country (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). It was also noteworthy, though, for precisely delimiting a barred zone from which all “Asiatic” groups would be prevented from migrating to the US. In the legislation, the description of the excluded territory provided detailed longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates that specified the geographical boundaries of where “Asiatic” races were located. Unlike Canada’s approach, which seemingly defined everyone and everywhere south and east of the Bosphorus to the Pacific Ocean as “Asiatic” (see also Hawkins 1988, 90), the American-defined “Asiatic exclusion zone” consisted of a large portion of Asia but, for political reasons, did not include Japan or the Philippines. As can be seen from the map (Figure 1) that Helal submitted as part of his petition, the Americans placed Syrians, as well as Persians and those from the Caucasus, outside of the “Asiatic” exclusion zone; it made them “white” and/or “European” by default (US Government Printing Office 1917). Since Syrians were not Asiatic, they were admissible to the United States.²⁴

To make Syrians’ place in the white racial cosmology of the United States even more secure, Helal provided an article from a 1928 volume of *The Syrian World: A Monthly Magazine in English Dealing with Syrian Affairs and Arabic Literature*, written by Joseph W. Ferris, a lawyer in New York. In it, Ferris analyzed the “Syrian Naturalization Question in the United States” and explained that

a vital question which confronted the Syrians in the United States has in all likelihood been finally determined. Considerable discussion had arisen respecting the provisions of our Naturalization Act and its applicability to Syrians... which declared and still declares that

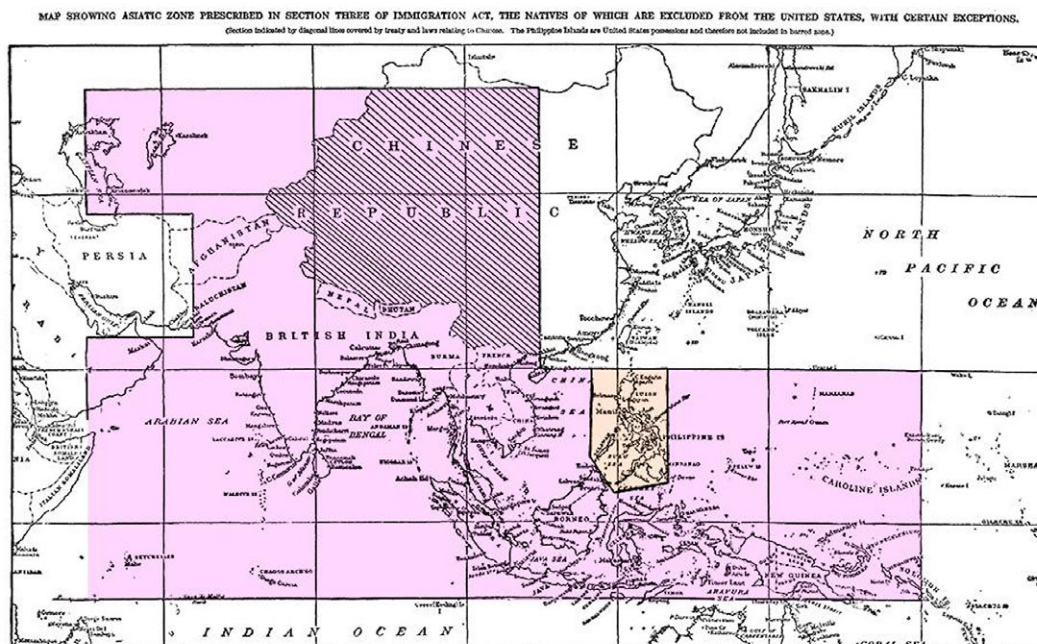


Figure 1. Map illustrating the “Asiatic barred zone,” as identified in section three of US Immigration Act passed in 1917.

the provisions of the Naturalization Act “shall apply to aliens being free white persons, to Aliens of African nativity, and to persons of African descent.”²⁵

Following the analysis of a number of US cases of naturalization, Ferris concluded that “so far as Syrians are concerned, it has been judicially determined that they fall within one of the classes to whom is accorded the privilege of citizenship,” which in effect meant that by virtue of American legal precedent, Syrians were aliens who were “free white persons.”²⁶

Shortly after Helal submitted his petition, the Armenian community in Canada also began its quest to have its racial status redefined in the context of P.C. 2115. Their cause was taken up by Fred Zaplitny, a Canadian Cooperative Federation (CCF) Member of Parliament for Dauphin, Manitoba. The son of Ukrainian immigrants to Canada, Zaplitny may have felt an affinity for another group of peripheral Europeans who were disadvantaged in Canadian immigration regulations (Satzewich 2000). He wrote to Hugh Keenleyside, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, on May 23, 1947, explaining that he had “received several representations from persons of Armenian origin now living in Canada” and was “assured that Armenians are not an Asiatic race.”²⁷ Zaplitny also provided documentation to support the claim that Armenians were not members of any Asiatic race. In a “declaration” signed by Guy Fregault and U. Risteumebar, both respected Professors of History at the University of Montreal, it was explained that “the expression ‘Asiatic Races’ mentioned in Orders in Council C.P. 2115, 695, 371 and 1734, has no geographic, nor historic, nor ethnologic signification and, consequently, should not be used.”²⁸ This claim was consistent with the emerging scientific consensus within the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization that “race” was a highly problematic way of classifying peoples of the world (Montagu 1972). But the professors would not completely challenge prevailing biological understandings of race, and like Helal in the case of Syrians, they proposed that the “expression of ‘Asiatic Races’ should in no way be applied to Armenians.”²⁹ Providing citations from the *Larousse Dictionary*, the professors claimed that Armenians were “of Indo-European culture, race, language and civilization. They are of Aryan origin”; “geographically speaking,

Armenia is situated in Transcaucasia, which is generally included in Europe"; and "many Armenians were born in Constantinople, a European city, which is situated on the European continent."³⁰ In other words, Armenians were a "European race," and definitely not part of the "Asiatic race."

Zaplitny also included in his representation a short, one-page history of "The Armenians And Canada."³¹ In an apparent attempt to calm the nerves about a potential flood of Armenian immigrants to Canada, the document explained that "there are about seven thousand real Armenians in Canada" but that "the number of Armenians who can or want to come in is very insignificant."³² The document pointed the finger at "a few clerks, who control the administration of the Immigration Department" and claimed that they "block the majority of requests because of two words (Asiatic Race) mentioned in C.P. 695 and C.P. 2115."³³ Like the two University of Montreal Professors, the authors of this document explained that "the Armenians are neither of Asiatic Race, nor of semitic origin: they speak an Indo-European language, and are considered as Aryan."³⁴ The document went on to highlight the accomplishments of Armenians in the United States, which was estimated at about two hundred thousand. They

have advanced agriculture, especially in California; they have also contributed artists, scientists, and writers of International [sic.] fame. What the Armenians did in the United States – do the Canadian Immigration Officers believe them unable to accomplish in Canada? Are these Officers not proud to have artists as Karsh in Ottawa? Then why deny to a group of citizens the privileges conceded to other people of Aryan and European origin?³⁵

Helal and the Syrian community's attempted end-run around Immigration Branch bureaucrats by directly appealing to Glen was not successful. The Minister appears to have channeled the petition to Hugh Keenleyside, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, who then pushed it back to Jolliffe, the Director of the Immigration Branch for response. Jolliffe continued to be obstructionist and was not open to amending either P.C. 2115 or P.C. 695. He explained that

the question arises as to whether it is the wish of the Government to remove Syrians and Armenians from the restrictions which now apply to them. If the regulations should be changed to deal with these races under P.C. 695 there would be a very considerable immigration of Syrians. If this is desired P.C. 2115 would have to be amended to exempt the particular races in question from its provisions and the last paragraph of 695 would also have to be amended. This action would, of course, again raise the question of discrimination against the East Indians and the other British subjects born in Asia...It seems to me that in view of all the complications that would arise by attempting to adjust the regulations to meet the wishes of the Syrians in Canada it would be preferable to continue the stand previously taken, namely that Order-in-Council P.C. 2115 relates to the natives of the Continent of Asia and is thus administered. This would involve advising Mr. Helal, K. C. of Montreal who has presented the recent submission, that there is no intention at this time of changing the regulations.³⁶

In a tersely worded response to Zaplitny's letter, Keenleyside took issue with the claim that "a few clerks" were personally responsible for blocking the migration of Armenians to Canada: "the clerks in question are carrying out the will of Parliament."³⁷ Keenleyside admitted that while the definition of "race" was in flux, the Immigration Branch had no interest in engaging in a debate about where certain groups fit in existing racial typologies:

With regard to the argument over whether or not the Armenians are of Asiatic race, all that can be said is that they are so defined in the legislation we have to administer. The subject of race is a very difficult one about which anthropologists and other specialists are in constant disagreement. As far as this Department is concerned, we can only accept the definitions that

are given to us. If, and when, these definitions are changed we will, of course, make whatever changes are required in our administration.³⁸

In short, immigration bureaucrats knew which broad groups of people they really wanted to admit and could care less about groups that fit ambiguously into the blunt racial categories that prevailed at the time. Not unlike the case of the Supreme Court's position on the racial categorization of the Inuit in Canada documented by Backhouse (1999), the circular reasoning of officials within the immigration department was basically that since Canadian legislation defined Syrians and Armenians as "Asiatic," then they were "Asiatic."

Claims to Whiteness, 1948–1949

The lobbying of the Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese-Canadian communities trailed off in the latter part of 1947. However, spring 1948 marked the beginning of a new phase of lobbying, and this new round was different in two respects. First, rather than focusing solely on P.C. 2115, the lobbying of Armenians expanded to include displaced persons. Second, while Armenians continued to go it alone in their lobbying efforts, Syrian and Lebanese officials formed an alliance that sought to have members of both groups admissible to Canada.

Armenian Displaced Persons

In the spring and summer of 1948, the Immigration Branch came under pressure from the Armenian community on a different front; it was asked to admit a small number of Armenians as displaced persons. In the summer of 1947, the Canadian government and the Immigration Branch undertook a massive resettlement of displaced persons located in refugee camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy (Danys 1986). Armenian-Canadians no doubt watched the evolution of the government's displaced persons policy with considerable interest and hope. Since Armenians regarded themselves as white, European, and anti-Communist, they likely saw the admission of other Eastern European displaced persons who were escaping Communism as a potential opening. They were wrong.

In April 1948, the Canadian Armenian Congress, "on behalf of all Canadian citizens of the Armenian race," submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet Committee on Immigration Policy regarding the admission of Displaced Persons of Armenian Origin.³⁹ The memorandum requested the admission of "500 of these unfortunate people who are desirous of making their homes here and share the God-given liberty with us which we enjoy in Canada abundantly."⁴⁰ The Congress explained that the Armenian displaced persons had the same occupational profiles that were in demand in Canada and for which other eastern European DPs were being recruited: "these people [Armenians] have various occupations, such as farmers, carpet makers, needle workers, tailors, factory workers, textile workers, [and] domestic servants."⁴¹ The Congress explained that C. D. Howe, as Minister of Reconstruction, had applications filed in his office by "several manufacturers in Galt and Guelph expressing a desire to employ at least 125 of these people, promising to take care of housing facilities."⁴²

The Congress also engaged in influential name-dropping and promoted the anti-Communist political credentials of Armenians. In the hope that the accomplishments of prominent, well-respected Armenians in the United States would help convince Canadian immigration bureaucrats that Armenians were of suitable immigrant material, the Congress explained that "famous international Restaurateur and Special Consultant to the United States Secretary of War,"⁴³ George Mardikian, had assured them that

these people politically are opposed to Communism and are extremely desirous of making their homes under the Democratic banner of Canada and since their former homes have been

captured and dominated by Communistic authorities, under no circumstances will they risk returning back.⁴⁴

Mardikian, of Armenian heritage and born in Constantinople, migrated to the USA in 1922 and, in a few years, became one of the United States' most celebrated restaurateurs (Keraghosian 2021). As Quartermaster General of the United States Army, Mardikian was also responsible for revamping how the US Army fed its troops (Keraghosian 2021). In 1945, he catered the United Nations Conference of International Organization meetings in San Francisco. He also became actively involved in Armenian resettlement issues in the United States. Using Mardikian's name, therefore, was not accidental. Clearly, the Congress thought that Mardikian's status as an accomplished Armenian immigrant who had made it in the United States and who had connections to powerful American military and political elites meant that his opinions about Armenian refugees could be trusted by Canadian authorities. In closing, the Congress pledged to support the refugees "in every way possible... in their resettlement, and will also help them to become desirable citizens."⁴⁵

While this recommendation was being considered by the Cabinet Committee on Immigration Policy, the Armenian community in Canada felt it was also important for a respected, influential, and well-connected Armenian-Canadian to also make a pitch on behalf of Armenian refugees. Yousef Karsh had migrated to Canada in 1924 and quickly became one of the world's most famous portrait photographers; the community must have hoped that his status, prestige, and personal connections would have an impact on immigration authorities. Karsh had photographed a substantial portion of the Canadian political, corporate, and bureaucratic elites, including Makenzie King and Louis St. Laurent (Karsh, n.d.1 and n.d. 2). As such, Karsh must have felt that the intimacy shared during those portrait sessions had allowed him to forge a close enough personal relationship to feel comfortable raising with them the Armenian DP issue directly. The first to be approached was Hugh Keenleyside, the Deputy Minister of Immigration. Karsh photographed Keenleyside, along with his wife and other family members, in 1944. In August 1948, Karsh wrote directly to Keenleyside, which was a follow-up to an earlier informal conversation in the summer of 1948. At that earlier meeting, Karsh raised the possibility of admitting "some five-hundred Displaced Armenians... to occupy themselves in tasks beneficial to the country."⁴⁶ Karsh provided Keenleyside with written assurance that the expenses associated with bringing the five hundred Armenians to Canada would be "guaranteed" and that "employment for them would be secured beforehand."⁴⁷ Karsh explained that the American National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians, along with the Canadian Armenian Congress, would provide the financial support and arrange employment for the Armenians.

But Karsh and the Congress went further. One of the challenges the Immigration Branch faced with the admission of other eastern European displaced persons was the unwillingness of some to remain in the employment they were allocated to for the first two years after their arrival (Satzewich 1991). Karsh assured the Deputy Minister that the Armenian Canadian Congress "a well organized group,"⁴⁸

will willingly act as a liaison [*sic.*] assistance to the Canadian Immigration Department, and that these Armenian Immigrants will carry out to the letter, whatever stipulation may be placed upon them by the Government regarding the length of time they will be required to remain in their various approved occupations – such as farming, etc.⁴⁹

In closing, Karsh further assured the Deputy Minister that "these people will prove to be a great credit to their race, but also to their adopted County [*sic.*] as well."⁵⁰

Despite his personal social capital, Karsh's and the Armenian community's request to admit Armenian DPs languished at the Interdepartmental Immigration-Labour Committee for a year. No action was taken to admit Armenians in 1948. In August 1949, that same Committee considered a more modest request to bring one hundred Armenian refugees to Canada. The Committee punted

the request to spring 1950, arguing that “this is not an appropriate time to broaden the field from which immigrants are being selected.”⁵¹ Keenleyside recommended telling the Armenian community that “the coming winter would be a difficult time to find employment for the one hundred Armenians” and that the decision would be reconsidered the following year. It does not appear to have been.

At the same time that the Canadian Armenian Congress and Karsh were working on Keenleyside and the Immigration Branch on admitting Armenians as displaced persons, other influential Armenian-Canadians went right to the proverbial top to press for a more general re-evaluation of the policy that defined Armenians as Asiatic. Personal acquaintances of Prime Minister Mackenzie King also wrote to ask for his help in nudging the Immigration Branch to open up immigration to Armenians. In June 1948, King received a letter from “Mr. Babayan,” whom, according to G. J. Matte, the PM’s Private Secretary, the Prime Minister “knows personally.”⁵² In the letter, Babayan asked King for his help to turn the Immigration Branch:

We shall appreciate it, if you will kindly take up the matter with the Immigration Department, regarding Armenians not being of the Asiatic race. This was proven by the historians and professors of the Universities, in the letter which Mrs. Babayan had shown you.... We shall appreciate it if you will use your influence to get this matter straightened out once for all.⁵³

The “Mr. and Mrs. Babayan” referred to here are almost certainly Levon and Perouz Babayan. Levon Babayan is described by Ohanian (2018, 12) as a “wealthy and well-connected” merchant in Canada who was involved in various Armenian organizations, including the Armenian Relief Association of Canada and the Armenian General Benevolent Union. Perouz Babayan is described as being “successful in urging Mackenzie King to intervene on the Armenian Question in 1948.”⁵⁴

Excerpts from the Babayan letter were forwarded by Matte to James MacKinnon, the new Minister of Mines and Resources, who had assumed his position a few weeks earlier. MacKinnon, likely not knowing the nuances of the Immigration Branch’s continued commitment to Asiatic exclusion, asked Jolliffe to prepare a response to the Prime Minister. The Babayans must have been influential because it only took the Immigration Branch and the Minister three days to submit a detailed response back to King’s Private Secretary. On June 26, 1948, Minister MacKinnon explained to Matte that the Immigration Branch had obtained a legal opinion from the Department of Justice confirming the legality of administering P.C. 2115 in a way that excluded Armenians. Unwilling to be persuaded by the evidence of the existing race science of the day that Armenians were not Asiatic, MacKinnon argued that “with all due respect to the opinions of the Professors mentioned above, it is believed the Departmental view that Armenia is part of Asia is valid.”⁵⁵ The Minister was also not reluctant to remind Matte, and hence King, of King’s own speech affirming the government’s intention to maintain restrictions on Asiatic immigration that had been made in the House of Commons the year earlier:

The view of the Government with regard to any change in the regulation under discussion was expressed by the Prime Minister in... 1947. Mr. King then said that the Government had no intention of removing the existing regulations respecting Asiatic immigration unless and until alternative measures of effective control have been worked out and, further that the Canadian Government is prepared, at any time, to enter into negotiations with other countries for special agreements for the control of admission of immigrants on a basis of complete equality and reciprocity.⁵⁶

In effect, the Minister used King’s own speech to remind King of why it was important to not tamper with legislation that excluded “Asiatics.”

King’s response to Babayan’s letter is not known; it may have been silence given his poor health and that the Liberals were in the midst of determining who would replace him as leader and Prime Minister. Once Louis St. Laurent was officially installed as Prime Minister in November 1948, the

pace of lobbying at the Prime Ministerial level once again increased. But despite the vacuum at the Prime Ministerial level in the summer and fall of 1948, pressure on the Immigration Branch continued.

The Syrian-Lebanese Alliance

In August 1948, Joseph Helal wrote a letter to James MacKinnon, the Minister of Mines and Resources, with a “humble petition” submitted on behalf of the newly formed Federation of Syrian-Lebanese Societies.⁵⁷ In the forwarded petition, the argument of the new association was “that Syrians and Lebanese are not of Asiatic Race,” and that

from the point of view customs, habits, modes of life and methods of holding property – should be deemed desirable immigrants and have in the past shown their ability and readiness to become assimilated to Canadian life and to assume the duties and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship.⁵⁸

The target of the petition continued to be the language of P.C. 2115 and PC 695 and recommended “the passing of an Order-in-Council... by virtue of which it be declared that Syrians and Lebanese be not deemed of Asiatic Race.”⁵⁹

The issue of Asiatic immigration was taken up by the Cabinet Committee on Immigration and the Cabinet as a whole in September 1948. The Immigration Branch continued to recommend that no change be made to either order-in-council, nor to reconsider the redefinition of Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese as “Asiatic”:

While the difficulties and objections to controlling immigration from Asia on a racial basis are recognized, it would be almost impossible to effect a proper control on any other basis. If the classes of admissible Asiatics are to be widened, such classes would require to be applicable to all races having their origin in Asia, unless the Government is prepared again to face the criticism of discrimination against a particular race, or races.⁶⁰

The mental contortions of the Immigration Branch officials here are interesting, to say the least. From their point of view, the only acceptable way to control immigration from Asia was on “a racial basis.” But Canadian policy could not be criticized as discriminatory if all groups that lived in “Asia” were excluded. It would only lead to “criticism” if some so-called “Asiatics” who were not actually of the “Asiatic race” were admissible.⁶¹ In the context of the confused racial thinking of the time, their twisted logic carried the day. The three groups are “Asiatic” because their countries of origin lie in “Asia”; Canada could not be accused of discrimination because it discriminated against all “Asiatics” equally.

Not knowing the outcome of the September Cabinet discussions, the three groups lost little time when it came to working on Louis St. Laurent and his Cabinet after he assumed office on November 15, 1948. On December 2, 1948, Maurice Tabet, the Consul of Lebanon in Ottawa, submitted “various documents” concerning the immigration into Canada of persons of Syrian and Lebanese origin.⁶² It was essentially the package that Joseph Helal had submitted on behalf of Syrians to Mackinnon’s predecessor, Glen, the year before.

In December, Exarch Jean Haddad from Chicago wrote directly to St. Laurent to congratulate him on his appointment as Prime Minister and to wish him “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.”⁶³ Haddad was Exarch in the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Chicago, whose parishioners included Syrian Catholics. But he also used the letter as an opportunity to press the case more broadly for Syrians and Lebanese, with Palestinians also added to the mix. Like others before him, Haddad wanted to create racial distance from others who fell within the category of “Asiatic” races and align them with a common line of descent connecting them with the French and British, the two charter groups in Canada. He wrote:

When Canada became an independent country, the members of the Government were opposed to the entry in Canada of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians. It is mistakenly believed that those peoples belong to the yellow race. They belong to the dynasty of Sem, who was not a member of the yellow race, and the French Canadians and British who came to Canada from Europe are descendants of Sem and Japheth.⁶⁴

Haddad's letter to St. Laurent was followed two weeks later, on December 24, 1948, by another letter to St. Laurent, this time by the Canadian Federation of Syrian-Lebanese Societies. Co-authored by James Zakoor, President, and Elias Karam, General Secretary, the letter also began by conveying good wishes and the best of the season to the newly elected Prime Minister. This was followed by an expression of the longstanding loyalty of the "Syrian-Lebanese" community to the Liberal Party of Canada:

Ever since the advent and rise in political life of the late, and much revered Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Syrian-Lebanese Canadians have been in the front rank of the supporters of Liberalism. They could not forget that they experienced their greatest influx into Canada during his regime, particularly in the early part of the century. The impetus of that attachment toward the party represented by this great leader, transferred to his illustrious successor, is still very active in native strength; a condition peculiar to a strongly sympathetic people. Syrian-Lebanese Canadians, therefore may still be counted as among your most loyal supporters and pray that you may long be spared to conduct Canadian affairs.⁶⁵

Getting to the point, Zakoor and Karam pressed St. Laurent to reconsider where Syrian-Lebanese fit into P.C. 2115:

P.C. 2115 has been the source of tremendous misery, expense and loss of prestige for these, your loyal supporters. They could not understand any reason why a misinterpretation such as is contained in this statute and related Orders should be allowed to continue to cause such hardship. The culmination of their hopes and determination forms the major purpose of this Federation of their societies, clear across Canada. May we not have a definition, a clarification of their status before the end of the next session of Parliament?⁶⁶

Since the Society was planning to hold a Board meeting in Ottawa in February 1949, they asked for an audience with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Mines and Resources. Members of the Federation were invited to present their case regarding P.C. 2115 to "a Committee of Cabinet" in late February 1949.⁶⁷ The delegation included nine individuals; Maurice Tabet, who had also become an honorary Member of the Federation, was designated as their spokesperson.

The minutes of that meeting are not contained in the archival record, but the representatives seemed to have received a sympathetic hearing from the Cabinet Committee. On April 1, 1949, Colin Gibson took over for Mackinnon, who was about to leave his position as Minister of Mines and Resources. While it is not clear whether it was St. Laurent or the newly appointed Gibson that was responsible, it appeared that after a meeting in April 1949, the Immigration Branch was prepared to redefine where Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese fit into Canada's immigration plans. Indeed, less than a month after assuming office, Gibson had the Immigration Branch prepare two recommendations to Cabinet that would address the concerns of the Association and presumably satisfy their request to be redefined as not falling within the definition of Asiatic race. Specifically, the Minister recommended that P.C. 2115 be amended "by inserting after the words 'any Asiatic race' the words 'other than immigrants of Armenian, Lebanese or Syrian origin'."⁶⁸ This recommendation would have removed the three groups from being defined as part of the prohibited class of "Asiatics." The second recommendation pertained to P.C. 4849, which would include the immediate family members of Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese already in Canada as members of the admissible classes of immigrants.⁶⁹

The Cabinet met on May 3 and 4, 1949, to consider these recommendations. Despite the support of both the Minister and the Immigration Branch for this change, the broader Cabinet appears to have gotten cold feet: “The Cabinet agreed ‘that no change be made in the immigration regulations with respect to the admissibility of Armenians, Lebanese and Syrians.’”⁷⁰

Following those meetings, Norman Robertson, Secretary to Cabinet, wrote to the Minister that “in view of the general tenor of the discussion... I thought you might wish to withhold this recommendation for the time being.”⁷¹ There is no public record of what the “general tenor of the discussion”⁷² was, but in a subsequent memo from Gibson to Keenleyside, it appeared that a decision “to treat these people as Europeans” had in fact been made at the Cabinet meeting but that “no announcement would be made before the election,”⁷³ which was held on June 27, 1949. Thus, even though the white identity claims of the Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese were essentially accepted by the Liberal government, electoral politics ended up snatching victory from them; they would have to wait for their whiteness to be confirmed until after the election. It appears that St. Laurent and the Liberals were concerned about what coming out publicly in favor of their eligibility for admissibility and their presumed whiteness would mean for their political fortunes. It is likely that the concern was rooted in a potential backlash to the announcement on the part of white Canadians who feared that this was the thin edge of the wedge that would result in more Asiatic immigration to Canada, and is consistent with David FitzGerald and David Cook-Martin’s (2014, 176) argument that during the early post-war years, Canadian politicians were reluctant to open up public debate about racist immigration policies because “the government did not trust a public clinging to its prejudices.” Alternatively, the Liberals may also have feared the potential backlash from other racialized groups in Canada such as Chinese- and Indo-Canadians, and their diplomatic representatives from their home countries, who could have reasonably argued that they were being explicitly racially discriminated against by the change.

Despite its unwillingness to publicly exempt Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese from P.C. 2115, the Cabinet did offer two consolation prizes to these communities. First, the Cabinet did agree that immediate family members should be dealt with “favourably” if they applied to enter Canada.⁷⁴ The list of relatives included:

The husband, or wife; the son, daughter, brother or sister, together with husband or wife and unmarried children; the father or mother; the orphan nephew or niece under 21 years of age; ... [and] a person entering Canada to marry a legal resident thereof.⁷⁵

Second, the Cabinet gave the Minister of Mines and Resources instructions to deal with individual cases of Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese by order-in-council. This measure allowed the immigration department to maintain blanket restrictions on the admission of Asiatic immigrants but allowed “meritorious” individuals to be admitted on a case-by-case basis (Elrick 2021). Politically, this meant that the government could have its cake and eat it too: it could still maintain its commitment to restricting Asiatic immigration and admit individual cases without the publicity associated with a change in overall policy. As Elrick (2021) argues, over the course of the 1950s, the admission of otherwise inadmissible immigrants via an order-in-council became one of the main under-the-radar administrative tools the immigration department used to begin the slow process of deracializing the process of immigrant selection.

After the election, the Minister seemed to have doubts about the wisdom of his earlier recommendation to exempt Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese from P.C. 2115. In a Memorandum to Cabinet dated September 26, 1949, that summarized the reasons for and against changing the regulations governing the admission to Canada of Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese immigrants, the Minister outlined the “reasons against” in the following terms⁷⁶:

1. Exemptions of specified nationalities from provisions of Order-in-Council P.C. 2115 would result in discrimination in the application of the Order.
2. The Government of India and East Indians in Canada for many years have been requesting exemption from the Order on the grounds that nationals of India are British subjects, and the Government of India are British subjects, and the Government of India a member of the Commonwealth. Such requests will become more insistent on the grounds that Indians should receive favourable treatment in this matter as aliens.
3. Armenians, Lebanese and Syrians are not readily assimilable in Canada.⁷⁷

In outlining the reasons for exempting these groups from P.C. 2115, the Minister was brief:

1. The fact that persons belong to these ethnic groups cannot bring their first-degree relatives to Canada.
2. The claim by these people that they are not Asiatics in the true sense of the term, their culture being similar to that of Europeans.⁷⁸

The Minister's memo is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it outlined the pros and cons of exempting the three groups from PC 2115, but this time it did not contain his or the department's specific recommendation. Second, it acknowledged that the knock-on effect of loosening inadmissibility for the three "nationalities" would constitute a precedent that could have negative consequences for Canada's ability to maintain restrictions on other racialized groups, particularly immigrants from India. Clearly, the immigration department and the Cabinet more generally did not want to encourage immigration from India or create a precedent that would give the Indian government leverage when it came to lobbying Canada to open its borders (Macklin 2011). Third, the Minister indirectly affirmed the arbitrary, confused, and muddled thinking when it came to understandings of race and ethnicity. The Minister acknowledged that these groups did not really fit into the department's blunt racial schema that defined them as "Asiatic" and that they really were culturally more like Europeans. At the same time, however, the Minister could not let go of the longstanding view within the department that, despite their cultural similarity to other Europeans, these groups did not "readily assimilate."⁷⁹ In other words, even though they were not Asiatic in race and even though they might be similar to Europeans in cultural terms, they were still racial others who were still unable to assimilate.

At its meeting dated September 29, 1949, the Cabinet affirmed its earlier preference to not open up PC 2115, but directed that "Armenians, Lebanese and Syrians are not to be absolutely barred by the provisions of P. C. 2115, it being understood that meritorious individual cases will be dealt with by Order-in-Council."⁸⁰

Insofar as the archival record contains no further correspondence on this topic from community activists after late 1949, the government's approach to dealing with the issue on an individual basis via order-in-council may have satisfied members of these three communities. A small uptick in immigration from Lebanon can be seen in immigration statistics from the time (Aboud 2002). The passage of the 1952 Immigration Act made the specific exclusion of Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese via P.C. 2115 something of a dead issue. Eliminating references to "race" among the potential legal reasons for a group to be excluded from Canada, the new Act nevertheless continued to give the Immigration Department widespread latitude to exclude any group from immigrating to Canada, on any criteria it could imagine, with the exception of "race." A long list of factors that could legally be invoked to exclude certain groups from migrating to Canada included "nationality, ethnic group, occupation"; "peculiar customs, habits, modes of life or methods of holding property"; and "probably inability to become readily assimilated... within a reasonable time after admission" (Elrick 2021, 29). How these criteria impacted members of these three communities requires further research.

Conclusion

Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese-Canadians claimed whiteness as “a strategy to secure an advantage in a competitive society” (Ignatiev 1995; Brodtkin 2000). The advantage, or benefit, they sought to claim was the ability of members of their community to migrate to Canada on the same basis as that of other white Europeans. Canada’s post-war racial cosmology and immigration policy had defined individuals from these countries as “Asiatic,” and hence, with the exception of certain limited family members, they were not able to migrate to Canada at a time when Canada was actively admitting white immigrants from western, central, and eastern Europe. But in contesting and seeking to distance themselves from the racial category of ‘Asiatic’ in immigration policy, they nevertheless continued to reinforce racial thinking and racial categories. Though biologically based racial categorizations were beginning to fall into political and scientific disfavor in some political and academic circles in the post-war period, Canadian immigration bureaucrats continued to vigorously reinforce racialized admission criteria. But so too did the members of these communities. They did not contest the meaning or validity of racial categorizations in themselves but rather where they were placed within existing racial categories. In claiming whiteness, they had to differentiate themselves from who they regarded as the true “Asiatic other,” and so they were eager to draw a sharp line marking themselves as white.

While some Canadian state officials seemed sympathetic to accepting their claims to whiteness and ability to migrate to Canada on the same basis as other white people of European origins, the broader racialized politics of whiteness in the early post-war period prevented them from being able to secure the full benefits of whiteness. Those officials were concerned that publicly acknowledging Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese as white would undermine the credibility of their denial that Canada’s immigration policy was discriminatory. In the twisted racial logic of the time, they thought that sustaining a broad geographical restriction on “Asiatic” immigration, which in essence defined all peoples in Asia as “Asiatic,” would protect them from accusations of discrimination. Fear of large-scale immigration from India trumped any public acknowledgement that Syrians, Armenians, and Lebanese were white, and hence generally admissible to Canada. As such, in the context of the larger racial politics at the time, where immigration authorities perceived that Canadians were not prepared to accept “Asiatic” immigrants, members of these three groups were casualties of the politics of whiteness. Immigration authorities’ solution to the problem of where these in-between peoples fit within Canada’s post-war immigration program was to place them in an “in-between” position in immigration policy and administration. They were reluctant to publicly acknowledge their whiteness, and hence, general admissibility; instead, they chose a less publicly visible mechanism (orders-in-council) of allowing small numbers to come to Canada. This allowed them to admit small numbers, and satisfy the demands of members of these communities, but without publicly acknowledging their whiteness.

The logic behind the immigration department’s use of individual-based orders-in-council to admit individual Syrian, Armenian, and Lebanese immigrants beginning in 1949 seems different from Elrick’s (2021) account of the department’s later logic when this mechanism was used more broadly to admit cases of “exceptional merit.” Her analysis suggests that by the late 1950s, by using orders-in-council to admit immigrants who were otherwise defined as racially unsuitable and inadmissible, immigration officials were slowly starting to reject ascribed, group-based immigrant selection criteria and coming around to the codification of social class and social status as the markers of admissibility and of successfully integrating into society (Elrick 2021, 95). In the case analyzed here, the department’s use of orders-in-council helped it dodge a wider public debate and potential backlash about “Asiatic” immigration, which in turn helped to sustain the existing racialized elements of the early post-war immigration system.

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Notes

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- 7 Letter, from M. J. Tabet, Consul of Lebanon in Ottawa to L. St. Laurent, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, May 7, 1947, RG 26.
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- 16 Ibid.
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- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
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- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See Gualtieri 2009, 52–80, for a more detailed discussion of Syrians and the naturalization issue in the US.
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- 52 Letter, from G. J. Matter, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary to J. A. MacKinnon, Minister of Mines and Resources, June 22, 1948, RG 26.
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- 63 Letter from Exarch J. Haddad to L. St. Laurent, Prime Minister of Canada, December 14, 1948, RG 26.
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