

## BOOK REVIEW / KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

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### FROM THE INDIAN OCEAN TO THE MEDITERRANEAN: THE GLOBAL TRADE NETWORKS OF ARMENIAN MERCHANTS FROM NEW JULFA

*(HİNT OKYANUSU'NDAN AKDENİZ'E: YENİ CULFALI  
ERMENİ TÛCCARLARIN KÛRESEL TİCARET AĞLARI)*

**Title:** From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa

**Author:** Sebouh David Aslanian

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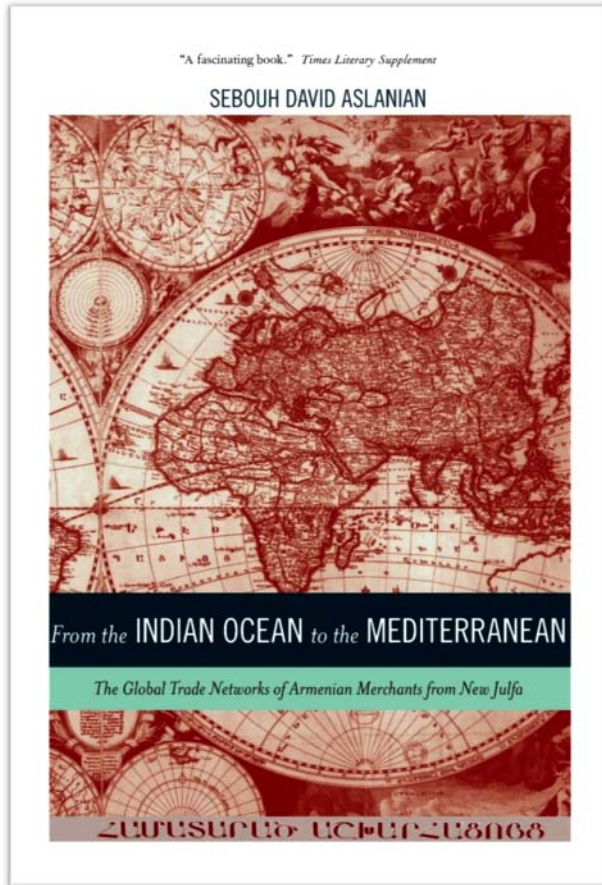
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**Number of pages:** 363

The author of this book, Sebouh David Aslanian, is a Professor of History and the Richard Hovannisian Endowed Chair of Modern Armenian History at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He is also the Director of the Armenian Studies Center within the UCLA Promise Armenian Institute. Aslanian, who received an award for

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the book that is the subject of our review, has published numerous scientific articles on Armenian history and Armenian studies.

His book titled *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* and published in 2011 is based on Aslanian's doctoral dissertation, which he completed in 2006, and his postdoctoral fellowship research in various archives.

The book consists of nine chapters, excluding the acknowledgments and preface. The book comprises 363 pages in total and there is a separate section between pages 235-305 composed of endnotes titled for each chapter. There is a bibliography between 307-343 and an index between 345-363.

Following a lengthy chapter of acknowledgments, Aslanian conveys the purpose of the book by stating "This book is an attempt to give meaning to the

global history created by a small community of Armenian merchants from Iran by sorting through and analyzing documents they left behind and looking for intelligible patterns and ‘perceptible relationships among facts’” (p. xviii) in the preface. The author explains that his primary concern is understanding how the merchants of this community structured their social lives, understanding their trading practices and the applications that sustained a global network of settlements scattered all over the world, and examining the repercussions of all these on both intra-community and extra-community relations.

The first chapter titled **“From Trade Diasporas to Circulation Societies”** mentions that, in 1605, Shah Abbas I deported some 300,000 Armenians from Julfa and that the Armenians who survived the deportation process were settled in Isfahan (also known as New Julfa), and explains the privileges granted to them by the shah. It is elaborated how the place and importance of Julfa and Julfa merchants in the world trade network increased in the following period and how Julfa became the first point of this established trade network. The chapter, which also includes a critique of the concept of trade diaspora, discusses the necessity of defining the concept of trade network as a “circulation society” (p. 14) and then explains the history of the Indian Ocean.

Despite being presented under a different title, the second chapter titled **“Old Julfa, the Great Deportations, and the Founding of New Julfa”** is in fact a continuation of the first chapter. It provides a general framework for the history of Old Julfa, the Safavid-Ottoman war and the resulting exile, and the establishment of New Julfa, with various references to travelers.

In the third chapter titled **“The Julfan Trade Network I: The World of the Indian Ocean”** and the fourth chapter titled **“The Julfan Trade Network II: The Mediterranean, Northwestern European, and Russian Networks”**, Aslanian examines the development and expansion of the Julfan trade network in the Indian Ocean, Russia, the Mediterranean, and northwestern Europe, presenting a general overview of the Julfan trade network’s circulation attributes. In these chapters, Aslanian states that these chapters are “meant to provide a historical context for subsequent examination of the various types of circulatory flows characterizing the Julfan economy and society”(p. 45).

The fifth chapter is titled **“The salt in a merchant’s letter’: Business Correspondence and the Courier System”**. This chapter emphasizes on the unifying impact of correspondence in the Julfa-based trade network. It attempts to answer questions of how the information network circulated, whether the merchants used couriers to deliver information to each other and how commercial correspondence played a role in long-distance trade. Through extensive archival research and the analysis of thousands of business letters, Aslanian expresses that he concludes that the merchants of Julfa possessed a

complex system of information circulation and makes inferences on the average speed of communication between settlements through letters. Aslanian examines the content of the letters under the headings of political and social news, news about the merchants themselves, and trade news. He states that the commercial letters even included tables that gave the then current price lists of commodities . On the other hand, he underlines that keeping personal commercial books up to date were contingent upon such letters. This chapter, which also presents facsimiles of letters, conveys that business letters could also contain information regarding family matters and that important information concerning trade could even be included in letters bearing bad news, implying that trade was the main subject of correspondences.

The sixth chapter, titled “**The Circulation of Men and Credit: The *Commenda* and the Family Firm**”, “explores the role of the *commenda* contract in Julfan trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by situating the *commenda* within the context of the ‘family firm,’ the basic organizational unit of Julfan commerce”(p. 121). In this chapter, Aslanian argues, again basing himself on available documents and archival studies, that it was the *commenda* system that enabled the Julfa-centered movement of merchants and goods over long distances, and that *commenda* was the single most important reason for the expansion of Julfan trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In the seventh chapter titled “**Trust, Social Capital, and Networks: Informal and Semiformal Institutions at Work**”, it is emphasized that trustworthiness was a key component of long-distance trade. Aslanian notes that trust was even more vital for merchants when they had to appoint representatives, give power of attorney, or lend large sums of money. In this context, this chapter “seeks to provide a historical explanation for the role of trust and cooperation in the Julfan trade network of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”(p. 168). The chapter also discusses the development of the Julfan commercial law, the impact of information contained in commercial correspondence on the formation of mutual trust, informal and semiformal institutions, the merchants’ council, its practices in disputes, and the activities of portable courts.

The eight chapter, titled “**The Center Cannot Hold: The Decline and Collapse of the Julfan Trade Network**”, focuses on the differences between the collapse of polycentric and monocentric trade networks and then describes the decline and collapse of the Julfan trade network in the eighteenth century. Different interpretations of the process leading up to the collapse are detailed in the chapter. Aslanian argues that the Armenian trade network covered different continents and cultures and was a circular community network that also encompassed its own culture, politics, and economy.

In the final chapter, titled “**Conclusion: Comparative Thoughts on Julfan Armenians, Multani Indians, and Sephardic Jews**”, Aslanian states that there are very few studies that comparatively examine trading communities. As a conclusion of the comparison, he states that Julfan and Multani networks had monocentric and distinct commercial habits, while Sephardic Jews had polycentric and flexible habits, and describes that these characteristics had an impact on geopolitical development in trade agreements and took part in different and large markets. On the other hand, Aslanian concludes that what determines the development of a trade network is the organization of very different networks rather than its geopolitical location.

The most important feature of Aslanian’s work is the fact that it is built on primary sources based on his archival research in different libraries around the world. The fact that it is written in a clear and understandable language increases its value. The texts of contracts, maps, tables, and examples of business letters contained in the book also contribute to the visualization of the narrative. In the first pages of the book, Aslanian reconceptualizes early modern trade diasporas as “circulation societies” with their unique networks and demonstrates the importance of information networks and communication in the functioning of long-distance merchant communities of this period. Aslanian’s study thus constitutes one of the main sources for future studies on trade networks.