FAYEZ SAYEGH AND FRIDTJOF NANSEN

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Dikran Abrahamian BA MD, Canada, 10 October 2009

> ***"We will stay in refugee camps***
> ***so that we don't end up like the Armenians!***

In early and mid-sixties, American officers stationed in Iran would attend courses at the American University in Beirut to improve their knowledge in various areas. There were a few following politics. During a classroom session related to international relations and jurisprudence, one of the officers asked the professor, "Why don't the Palestinians, who get the best scholarships and international help, all sort of encouragement to get settled in the various countries, accept citizenship which is offered to them?" Of course, forty years later, I cannot remember the exact words, but the gist is there.
To this date, I hear the professor's curt answer, "We will stay in refugee camps so that we don't end up like the Armenians!"
Fayez Sayegh was the professor. He was a Christian Palestinian. In 1965, he founded and became the director-general of the Palestine Research Center. Later, he served in various capacities for a variety of Arab states at the UN, and ultimately as chief of the Arab States' delegation to the UN.

For years, this vibrant teacher's picture I could not separate in my mind from that of Fridtjof Nansen, the great Norwegian humanitarian who helped thousands of Armenian refugees and provided a document of identity to them sanctioned by the League of Nations.That generation is gone. With it, the identity documents are lost. The descendants of the Genocide generation have become citizens of various countries around the globe. Lost is the status of being a subject applicable in international law.

A subject can define its rights, and claim its demands. People is considered a subject, but individuals of a variety of citizenship without the proof of belonging to that entity are not subjects, and such individuals do not form a people with a demand.

Hence, Armenians in the Diaspora, under traditional international concepts have no legal status. Fortunately, international law is dynamic. It entails a process that draws similarities, precedents, etc. from a variety of sources. Claims are deliberated and conclusions are drawn on a case-by-case basis.

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples (1976), UNO's Sub-Commission on prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (1985), the conclusion of International Center for Transitional Justice (2003), the comprehensive resolution of the National Assembly of Venezuela (2005) dealing specifically with the Armenians and the Genocide, and similar statements, constitute a preliminary set of documents that provide a basis for further discussion.

The Diaspora Armenians should embark on the Herculean job to define how to become and who are the individuals that should be considered to form the people under international law. The specialists in the various fields of legal studies will pave the way to accomplish this task.

Without the formation of people as subject under international law, even the loftiest declarations about the Genocide of the Armenians will not lead us to the cherished goals. Resolutions limited to acknowledging the Genocide in various jurisdictions, proclamations of historians and scholars about its veracity, a President declaring his sympathy, etc. do not form in themselves legal grounds for any action. Granted, they lend moral support.

This matter has taken an urgent pace thanks to Edouard Nalbandian and Ahmet Davutoğlu, respective foreign ministers of Armenia and Turkey. With the blessing of the Great powers, they have completely shut off the Diaspora from the process of negotiations and subsequent decisions. There is a silver lining though. May be we owe them a big thank you for making us, Diasporans, realize that we are left to our own devices.

We, the Diasporan Armenians, are indirectly told to forge a truly effective unified strategy to define first ourselves as people, and concurrently formulate our demands. For as long as we are multicentric and a diverse amalgamation of individuals and speaking in cacophony, and no matter how high we shout, or how just demands we make, the International Law (as opposed to the international community) will not listen to us. It has neither the right nor the obligation.

These are not novel ideas. Many a community leaders and intellectuals over the past decades have espoused such thoughts. There was a short lull following the unorthodox undertakings of young people in the eighties. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the liberation and preservation of Artsakh, and then of course, the expectation of some that the Armenian authorities would take the lead.

The geopolitical situation in the Caucusus, Armenia's institutional flaws, the signing of the Protocols between Armenia and Turkey, etc have all come to convince at least this writer that the Diaspora has to be more vigilant and creative. In this final decade of the centennial of the Genocide, we have to demonstrate that we not only believe in our just cause, but also are ready to meet the enormous challenges without despair.

There are many objective, external impediments related to primarily how we define ourselves as People. What form of entity should that entail, what sort of representation it should have? Should it be in the form of people-in-exile, people without territory or lost territory?

With respect to subjective hurdles, there are many, but they are not insurmountable. They are of our own making, and for as long as there is a collective will, they can be resolved. A submission about this will shortly follow in Keghart.