

# ARMENIA-DIASPORA UNITY MUST BE PRESERVED AT ALL COST

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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 4 February 2010

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While Armenia's leaders have the right to take decisions on behalf of the country's 3 million inhabitants, they also have an obligation to take into account the interests of all 10 million Armenians worldwide on pan-Armenian issues, such as the Genocide, the Artsakh (Karabagh) conflict and demands from Turkey.

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In negotiating the Armenia-Turkey Protocols, Armenian officials should have shown more sensitivity to critical national issues. By signing the contested agreements with Turkey, they alarmed and deeply hurt Armenians worldwide. Thousands of angry demonstrators reacted by hurling vitriolic epithets at Pres. Sargsyan, during his October tour of the Diaspora to promote the Protocols. Such confrontations, unprecedented during earlier presidential visits, reflected negatively on the authorities as well as the protesting public.

A small land-locked state faced with blockade, war, economic hardships and enemies on both sides, can ill afford internal divisions and conflicts with its Diaspora. Such discord can only please Turkish leaders who have made no secret of their scheme to split Armenia from "the radical Diaspora," thus making it easier for them to extract concessions on Artsakh, Genocide recognition, and demands for restitution.

What lessons Armenians must now draw from the disheartening experience of infighting over the Protocols?

1) Armenia's leaders should exercise greater caution and sensitivity by engaging in private consultations with Diasporan leaders prior to conducting negotiations and signing agreements on issues that impact the entire Armenian nation.

2) A Diaspora-wide leadership must be elected to reflect properly the views of the majority of Armenians on crucial issues. Such a mechanism would facilitate the transmission of credible

feedback from the Diaspora to Armenia's leaders and to governments and international organizations. Further details will be presented on this important topic in a future column.

- 3) Diaspora Armenians should not let disagreements with Armenia's leadership discourage them from extending aid to the needy, making investments in the country's economy, and visiting the homeland.
- 4) In addition to avoiding a split between the Diaspora and Armenia, it is equally important to prevent serious divisions among Diaspora organizations, without stifling the healthy exchange of views and disagreements.
- 5) The Armenian President needs to receive expert advice on critical economic and political issues which necessitates the creation of a Council of Economic Advisors and a Council on Foreign Relations, consisting of internationally recognized experts. Furthermore, a team of international lawyers should be assembled to advise the President prior to signing international agreements in order to avoid fundamental mistakes which subsequently may have to be corrected by the Constitutional Court.
- 6) The Armenian government should have assigned the Diaspora Ministry to serve as an unfettered channel of communication between Armenia and the Diaspora during the debates on the Protocols. The Ministry could have been the mechanism through which the concerns and complaints of Armenians worldwide would have been relayed to the Foreign Ministry and the President's office. After all, the Diaspora Ministry is supposed to be a bridge between the two segments of the Armenian nation. While it is true that the Diaspora Minister accompanied the President during his tour of several countries last October, the Ministry would have gained far more credibility had it been allowed to play a more independent role.
- 7) Armenian officials must realize that Turkey, given its size and strategic location, has a greater opportunity to get its views publicized through the international media than it is possible for Armenia. Therefore, any issue on which Armenians and Turks have conflicting interpretations, the Turkish version will prevail by being more widely disseminated than the Armenian point of view. That is one of the reasons why agreeing to establish a "historical commission" was not a good idea. According to Turkish officials, the commission was to review the facts of the Armenian Genocide, while the Armenian leaders stated that its objective was to assess the consequences of the Genocide. Had the Protocols been ratified, the Turks would have proceeded to deny the facts of the Genocide and would have succeeded in blaming Armenians for undermining "the good work" of the commission.
- 8) The Protocols, rather than helping to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey, have in fact greatly damaged the prospects of such reconciliation. Future attempts must begin with the preliminary steps of opening the border and establishing diplomatic relations rather than cramming dozens of unrelated issues and preconditions into a single agreement. True reconciliation has to be based on truth and justice, not lies and cover ups!



