ARMENIAN DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATION IN ERBIL

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By **Hrant Gadarigian**, BazNews, 9 December 2014

> *Mr. H. Gadarigian, with roots in western Armenia, has been the English language editor of Hetq Online, Armenia's primary independent investigative news outlet since 2008.-Ed.*

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Hetq sent the following questions to Mr. Karwan Zebari, Director of Congressional & Academic Affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Representation in the USA, regarding diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the KRG in Iraq.

Following Mr. Zebari's responses, we also present the views of several prominent political analysts on the subject.

1 – 26 states now have diplomatic representation in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan – Armenia is not one of them. This, despite the fact that Yerevan and Erbil are a mere 282 miles apart as the crow flies.

During his visit to Baghdad in February of this year, Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian announced that Armenia was planning to open a consulate general in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. To your knowledge has it done so? Are you aware of any problems delaying the opening?

I'm afraid I can't comment authoritatively on KRG-Armenia relations, as my portfolio is US-KRG. If you want answers to some of your more specific questions, I would recommend you reach out to KRG Department of Foreign Relations. They would be able to comment directly on the issue of an exchange of diplomatic missions.

These are very trying times in Kurdistan. We are fighting a war with ISIL terrorists, and hosting 1.4 million refugees in our region of 5.3 million people, and for obvious reasons our focus has shifted to these issues. Given the past delegations, I perceive KRG-Armenian relations as quite good. It seems that there is about 1 delegation per year to the region, which from my understanding has always gone very well. I do not think there is a lack of will or indifference, by any means. Establishing diplomatic missions is a long, process, and I think that the situation on ground has dictated the speed with which we can seek to complete these. Both the KRG and Armenia have always expressed an interest in having diplomatic mission and I firmly believe we will see them appear in the near future.

2 – Despite this absence of official diplomatic relations between the KRG and Yerevan, Armenia does have an ambassador, Karen Grigoryan, posted in Baghdad. To your knowledge, has Ambassador Grigoryan ever travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan or contacted any KRG representatives in an official capacity?

I am unaware of any trip by the current Amb. Karen Grigoryan, though I do know that the previous Amb. Murad Muradian made at least one trip to the Kurdistan Region, including one as part of the delegation from Armenia's Deputy Minister of Economy, Mr. Tigran Harutyunyan, in August 2013.

3 – Conversely, has the KRG ever contacted the Armenian government, whether regarding trade, investment, or any other issue of mutual concern? Does Armenia enter into the KRG's foreign policy sphere, and if so, in what respect?

Given the past delegations, I would imagine our governments are still in contact, but like I said, I can't speak authoritatively on this. Now, with these multiple crises, we are in need of support from our international partners. This would be an opportune moment for the Republic of Armenia to show its support for the people of Kurdistan.

4 – Armenians and Kurds, in many respects, have a shared history in the region. In your estimation, should the problems of the past serve to hinder prospects for greater contact and possible cooperation in the future? Specifically, does the KRG have a position regarding the 1915 Armenian Genocide? If so, what is that position?

As Kurds, we understand the horrors and legacies of genocide. We have always denounced the events of 1915. The pain of the past should not hinder our future cooperation; today is a different era, and the

only path is forward.

5 – The KRG's website lists Armenians as one of the peoples inhabiting Iraqi Kurdistan. Do you have estimates as to their number? Many are descendants of Genocide survivors who fled the Ottoman Empire who have retained their Christian faith. Are they represented in the parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan?

The Constitution of the Kurdistan Region mandates 1 seat in parliament be allocated for Armenians. 5 seats are allocated for Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac candidates. The Kurdistan Region is an incredibly diverse place, a fact that we celebrate. I unfortunately do not have estimates as to the origin and population of the Armenians.

6 – On July 1, 2014, President Massoud Barzani of Iraqi Kurdistan announced that "Iraqi Kurds will hold an independence referendum within months." Given the region's booming economy based on oil exports and the disintegration of the Iraqi central state apparatus, such a notion might have sounded plausible then. What about now? Has the ongoing threat posed by ISIL and the U.S. push for maintaining a federated Iraq postponed such a move for independence?

Although independence is a dream in the heart of every Kurd, today we recognize that ISIL is a cancer that must be stamped out, and this drives our policy on this. We do not share more than a 15 km border with Iraqi Security Forces, the rest of the 1030 km border is shared with ISIL, a condition that no nation on earth could endure. In short, we have much bigger issues to solve at the moment, and we recognize our duty to act to counter this evil.

Gerard Libaridian

The Kurdish Region in the north of Iraq is not only *de facto* autonomous, but also *de jure* autonomous. By and large it is *de facto* independent. Whether or not the KRG achieves *de jure* independence is, at this time, secondary. We have a number of good reasons to establish some sort of diplomatic presence in Erbil and a few bad reasons why not to do so.

Armenia's foreign policy should be based on a circumspect and cautious realism. The KRG is only part of the very complex Kurdish issue. We have talked too much about the Kurdish factor and done very little about it. It is always advisable to have direct, and even formal, contact with any state or political entity that affects its neighborhood.

It is not clear to me why the Republic of Armenia does not, as yet, have an official diplomatic presence in Erbil that could facilitate the lives of Armenians in the KRG – both indigenous and refugees from the rest of Iraq – as well as work with the Kurdish authorities toward the goal of security, stability and development in the region.

It is possible that we should look at the degree of independence of Armenia's foreign policy to explain the failure to establish the consulate that the Foreign Minister of Armenia promised.

Vicken Cheterian

Armenian official presence in Erbil is late by some ten years. There are three reasons for which Erbil, and more generally cultivating contacts with various Kurdish representations, is important:

As Armenian communities in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East became victim of radical Islamist repression, Armenians sought refuge in Kurdish regions. The Republic of Armenia has the moral responsibility to ensure their safety and well-being.

The Kurdish political factor is emerging in the region. Kurds are Armenia's direct neighbors, while the KRG is an indirect neighbor – just behind Turkey. Anyone, even without having a PhD in International Relations, by looking at the map could tell you about the strategic importance of the KRG for Armenia.

Erbil offers enormous economic opportunities, as it has its own rich resources, plus 17% of Iraqi budget. An Armenian political presence there could facilitate exchanges between Armenian industries and service sector.

Asbed Kotchikian

Establishing or maintaining diplomatic relations has to be based on bilateral cooperation (economically and politically).

In other words what does Armenia have to offer to KRG and what does northern Kurdistan has to offer to Armenia.

Establishing a diplomatic relation might trigger such interactions but the question remains at what level and for what focused purpose. Establishing direct flights to Erbil should develop some long term economic and political prospects for both entities. However there should be a clear and well-articulated (or at least well thought) strategy as to what are the expectations from such a relationship. Having diplomatic relations just for the sake of relations is counterproductive.

Moreover, considering that there is an Armenian in the KRP (parliament) and that there is a sizeable Yezidi community in Armenia, those two factors could become a rallying point for the Armenian government to at least establish a nominal presence in Northern Iraq/Kurdistan.

Finally the establishment of any diplomatic mission or representations comes with financial obligations and also a cost/benefit analysis. Armenian diplomacy, being mostly reactive in the recent decade or so, is in no condition to embark on such an endeavor unless it is coordinated with the small Armenian community in northern Iraq and also cooperating with individuals who have firsthand knowledge of the region (either by doing business there or having been there many times).