BEADS ON FIRE

Posted on September 25, 2009 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Lalai Manjikian, PhD Candidate, Montréal, The Armenian Weekly, 22 September 2009

In my everyday life, I am an advocate for dialogue. In most cases, I prefer addressing issues head on, as diplomatically as possible, of course, although being fully aware that all hell can break loose. This approach is likely to generate strong emotions, tension, conflict, and pain, and may not even solve the problem at hand; instead, it may make things worse. Communication is, after all, to quote John D. Peters, "a matter of faith and risk." Loud silences tend to be unsettling, so generally, some prefer taking the risk to vocalize what needs to be said, even if it is deeply flawed or the outcome is highly unpredictable.

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Turkey and Armenia have seemingly opted for this route, or should I say, for this so-called "roadmap." Recently, the two neighbouring nations announced the initiation of protocols with the aim of "normalizing" their diplomatic relations, mediated by Switzerland. It all sounds so noble on the surface. With the advent of these protocols, Turkey has agreed to address the issue of the Armenian Genocide, by shrewdly displaying its readiness and willingness to engage in "dialogue" with Armenia around contentious issues. Armenia's government has decided to jump in for the ride as well, with Turkey sitting firmly at the wheel. However, for someone who is a fan of dialogue, I, along with many other Armenians living in the diaspora and in Armenia alike, are not about to embark on this ambiguous and dehumanizing realpolitik joyride. This excuse of a rapprochement may provide a diplomatic rush to the heads of certain leaders, but in reality, it can severely compromise Armenia's national security and the Armenian Cause.

What I find to be particularly appalling is the degree of concessions the government of Armenia seems willing to make, particularly found in the protocol's clause pertaining to "a dialogue on the historical dimension." This "dialogue" includes an "impartial and scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations." This clause, which relates namely to the genocide, is misleading in more than one way: Such a statement places an enormous and unwarranted question mark on an indisputable historical fact. Furthermore, it shows utter disrespect to those massacred, undermines all the activists who have dedicated their

lives to genocide awareness and recognition, and most absurdly, completely dismisses the considerable existing body of research dedicated to the genocide, conducted over decades by scholars from all around the world, including from Turkey. It is also an insult to the more than 20 countries that have formally recognized the Armenian Genocide.

Although the Armenian-Turkish border is a historically and politically complex issue, in many Armenians' eyes, an open border could be the answer to Armenia's economic problems. As an Armenian living in relative diasporic ease, I can empathize with the desire to open the border for economic reasons. But if the border is opened under the conditions as outlined by the protocols, this political faux pas will come to reaffirm Turkey's current borders, which are based on dispossession and genocide. Another unsettling aspect about the protocols is the non-mention of self-determination in any of the clauses found in the protocols. What does this entail for the people of Karabagh?

As non-transparent as these protocols are, a part of me sees the value in two enemy countries attempting to communicate. I am, after all, a staunch believer in non-hostile and constructive dialogue between Armenians and Turks on less formal grounds, meaning on interpersonal levels. But how do you engage in truthful dialogue when a government whose ancestors are undisputedly guilty of genocide are once again questioning it? How do you embark in a relationship, without adequately confronting your past?

Although our everyday lives unfold throughout the diaspora, we are misguided if we consider ourselves to be a marginal voice, having directly assisted, supported, celebrated, mourned, and lived with Armenia for decades. Today, more than ever, being passive about this roadmap is not an option, nor can we accept to lose ground after all the progress Armenia and the diaspora have marked together—in the struggle from Armenia's independence, to the nation's development, to the struggle for a liberated Karabagh, to the number of countries worldwide who officially recognize the Armenian Genocide.

In the name of our ancestors who were massacred and displaced, and in the name of humanity who has witnessed the cycle of genocide repeat itself time and again, we cannot afford to settle for such a dehumanizing faux pas masked as diplomacy.

The protocols undoubtedly ignited sparks all around the Armenian world, setting many beads on fire. And the calls for mass mobilization will continue to spread inextinguishable flames, until justice prevails.

Note: John Durham Peters' citation is from his book Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (1999) from the chapter "Introduction: The Problem of Communication.