# CRUCIAL DIRECTIONS IN ARMENIA-DIASPORA RELATIONS

*Posted on December 28, 2008 by Keghart*



**Category:** Opinions

**By Prof. Onnig Beylerian**, Montreal, 31 July 2008

I should like to thank everyone who took time to reflect on the subjects I raised in my PowerPoint presentation, which was not the best tool to express the nuances of one's own thoughts. It is also encouraging to see that Armenia-Diaspora relations do generate passionate arguments and debate. That is yet another indication there is a great future for Armenia and its Diaspora.



To put things in their context, I was asked by Dr. Dikran Abrahamian to present findings based on my own observations of Armenia-Diaspora relations, as they relate with policy development. My views did not in any way reflect those institutions I could be or am associated with. They are truly my own contributions as a distant and admittedly non-influential member of Canada's Armenian community.

In this response, I can only be brief and respond to what I think are the most important issues raised by those who have been gentle enough to consider and comment my findings and observations.

1. Undoubtedly the Diaspora is already involved in Armenia. To say the Diaspora should not interfere in Armenia's affairs is not to recognize reality. The main question is how the Diaspora's involvement can be more effective. Seeking remittances and cash disbursements or relying on the goodwill of individual Diasporans is insufficient and misplaced in many ways. Money is not everything; the real wealth of the Diaspora resides is in its know-how, cumulative experience and global networks, which are not noticeable if one goes to a typical Armenian church on a Sunday morning. These are the ingredients Armenia is after and which it wants to tap. The problem is that this is a treasure chest that can only be opened through a set of policies that provides Diasporans with concrete incentives to participate in Armenia's development. Without these incentives, I don't see how the Diaspora will develop its present engagement to higher levels. Hence my suggestion that Armenia should provide the Diaspora with means to participate effectively in the Armenian political process and institution building, and not necessarily in the decision-making process; even though Armenia's foreign policy was and still is led by personalities largely supported and well-regarded by the Diaspora. By participating in the political process, I mean Diasporan representatives sitting in the Parliament in some capacity, or competent Diasporans sitting on government consultative bodies, such as commissions to fight corruption or setting up a professional and non partisan public service. The Diaspora could also be entrusted to set up an independent body to monitor and report the validity of results of future elections. There are many other useful tasks the Diaspora could do if it was seriously asked as a means to effectively contribute to Armenia's political and economic development. The Diaspora may not have the experience at first to undertake these

tasks, but lack of experience is no excuse for not trying to do the best it can.

2. Does the Diaspora possess the capacity to do all of the latter? To answer this question one needs to make a distinction between community organizations situated at the level of host countries and full-fledged Diasporan organizations that represent several community organizations at once. Forcibly, such organizations would span across several host countries, such as the United States and Canada. Today, while there is appreciable traffic between Armenians living in different countries who collaborate on multiple projects and issues, there are no permanent consultative or coordinating bodies whose mission is to address the interests and needs of Armenian communities throughout the world. Conventional wisdom amongst Armenians is to keep their business low-key as there are obvious advantages to get the job done in the traditional and time-tested Armenian way. But there are also disadvantages in that it does not contribute to institution-building and it leaves a lot of Armenians out of the loop.

Therefore it is not surprising that the Diaspora is not ready to play any useful role at this moment, because it has no institutional and organizational transnational existence and because the opportunity to create that context was simply never attempted, despite the goodwill of influential Diasporans very keen in creating their self-styled personal Congresses. One would have wished that the initiative to build the Diaspora's transnational institutions came from its own ranks. But unfortunately that did not happen thus far. So Armenia stepped in since it does face immediate and serious challenges even more so that it can use state means to establish some process to have access to the Diaspora's resources.

So far Armenia organized three conferences and despite the huge enthusiasm generated by those venues, no permanent bodies came out if it. Everybody returned home to continue their daily Diasporan chores and we're still wondering as to what really happened. The last conference looked like an academic symposium instead of being a true Assembly of Armenians (or more aptly Hayotz Hamazhoghov -- I'm sure Viken will correct my Western Armenian); which should be the equivalent of the General Estates where a nation takes stock of the issues it faces but also of its strength . It's like drawing up an inventory of one's capabilities and ultimately power so as to address major challenges. If at the fourth Armenia-Diaspora conference there is clear political will to conduct the proceedings in that way and with the clear intent of establishing permanent bodies to develop and implement major policies and programmes, then a huge step will be taken in the right direction as many capable and skilful Diasporans will in time step forward. It should remain a hope that the Dialogue Committee set up by Armenia's Foreign Affairs will broach this issue and eventually adopt practical measures to reach out to many Diasporans.

3. Some have argued that the Diaspora is in such a sorry state when it comes to its own internal political processes that it would be arrogant on the Diaspora's part to claim that it can "interfere" at will in Armenia' internal affairs. First, I do not share the dire conclusions of the institutional state of Armenian communities. On the contrary it is hard not to fully recognize those who did contribute to the building of schools and churches to protect and nurture small islands of Armenia in distant lands. It is also hard to dismiss either all those who selflessly contributed to the genocide recognition campaigns or those who responded to the calls of Armenians in distress in 1988, 1991 and onwards, such as Charles Aznavour who had forgotten his roots until the earthquakes shook him up to his core. Many of the Diaspora's efforts are those of unsung heroes of Armenian communities across the globe and whose histories have yet to be written. In short, let us not short change the enormous achievements of individual communities.

However the institutional weaknesses of community organizations --and there are many—we need to hang on to them at all costs. The only sure way that Armenian life in the Diaspora can flourish is to modernize these community organizations and to welcome back all those who have left it for good or those who among the younger generation do not see any interest in being part of it. I do not have readymade answers as to how that feat can be realized. But I do know that exceptional young Diasporans did not wait for that modernization to happen and therefore moved to discover the deepest dimensions of Armenia and hence of themselves. In this discovery, the hub is in Armenia but also in individual communities where there is need for more transparency and inclusiveness. Without really noticing, a new global Armenian identity is emerging where it will be difficult to draw a clear line between the Diaspora and Armenia. The contours of that identity remain quite hazy, but one way to find that out is to draw together individual communities spread across the globe in workable forums. I believe that mustering the Diaspora's power in its own organizations or institutions with the full support of Armenia as its base represents one way of initiating and promoting this modernization.

However, we have to be realists and correctly evaluate the stage at which the Diaspora and Armenia are so as to move from that point onwards, slowly but surely. In many ways both are at same level of political development. Therefore they are called upon to work in tandem as the Diaspora will never disappear: it has proven it can survive and regroup even after the worst disaster. Nor will it dissolve in some big repatriation scheme.

Armenia has the ingredients to help the Diaspora to get its act together and the Diaspora has the ingredients to help Armenia even more effectively, provided that the Diaspora is given the opportunity to do so. Both sides have everything to gain if they can only identify what is to be done. This entails that they accept to work hard in making this happen. It's not an easy task and it will take several generations.

I hope I answered to some of the questions which were raised.

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