

CAVIAR DIPLOMACY VS. DEDICATION

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✘ Editorial, 5 August 2014

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Beardj Barsoumian's instincts were on the money. However, when he asked Towns whether the Azeris were behind the initiative, Towns denied it. Enter Phil Williams of "NewsChannel 5 Investigates". The reporter, who had exposed an Azeri/Turkish junket for 12 Tennessee politicians last year, also smelled a rat. Following the money trail, he found that two weeks before Towns introduced his resolution he had received a \$10,000 campaign contribution from Texas. Williams also learned that the windfall had come from half-a-dozen Azeris and Turks of the Turkish-Azeri Cultural Centre in Houston. Williams found it interesting that the \$10,000 check had been issued from a low-rent apartment in Houston. He also discovered that \$13,000 had been sent to candidates across the US from the same building located in one of the city's roughest neighborhoods.

Towns said his resolution and the contribution was "coincidental." Because of the scandal the resolution never even got a vote. A collateral benefit: many Americans became aware of the Azeri campaign to corrupt politicians.

The Tennessee scandal wasn't unique or even rare. Several months earlier, the Azeris, led by Ambassador Elin Suleymanov had tried a similar ploy in Hawaii. Two state politicians, who had gone to an all-expense trip to Azerbaijan, had introduced a resolution which portrayed the Khojalu battle as "genocide". As in Tennessee, the corrupt duo, who had been seduced by Baku's caviar diplomacy, bit the dust, thanks mainly to the efforts of four Armenians: Elen Asatryan; Arpine Philian Mar; Arthur and Ani Martirosian. The latter delivered an eloquent speech which convinced many Hawaiians and that the Azeri initiative smelled high... like stale caviar. The resolution was rejected.

As in Tennessee, the Hawaii Armenians had the solid backing of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA). The Washington-based organization sent alerts to its members, encouraged them to send letters and to petition Hawaiian politicians about the devious Azeri campaign. In the

days leading up to the committee hearings, Armenians submitted hundreds of letters.

The same scenario has played out in a number of states. In most cases local Armenians and the ANCA have managed to defeat the Azeri campaigns.

Why have the Azeris picked Hawaii, Tennessee, Georgia, and Wyoming to advance their nefarious cause? Because few Armenians live in these states: objection would be minimal, if non-existent, especially if the wheels of politics are lubricated with oil-soaked cash.

Why is Baku spending millions on public relations in the US and in Europe? It's not that the Azeri ambassador is reading Dale Carnegie's "How to Make Friends and Influence People" bestseller of yore. In fact, the project's target is the oppressed Azeri masses that are being denied their share of the oil-soaked easy money. Baby Aliev wants to show to his unhappy subjects that he is popular in the West and that he is fighting the Armenians.

Aram Hamparian, executive director of the ANCA and a veteran of the Azeri/Armenian duel, says that when Azeris began their anti-Armenian campaign in the late '80s, they were clumsy and confused. But since Aliev consolidated his regime, they've become "sophisticated and aggressive." The Azeri campaign has become more professional due to the input of Washington PR companies. The latter charge the Azeri embassy \$50,000 per month plus expenses to provide strategic counsel on "how to strengthen Azeri ties with the US government and institutions." In addition to the Azeri ambassador, parallel Azeri campaigns are conducted by the Azeri state oil company (SOCAR) and American companies with investments in Azerbaijan. They get support also from Ankara, Gulen's Hizmet movement, and Turkish-American groups. Although it's commonly believed that Azerbaijan spends about \$2 million a year in the U.S. to burnish its soiled profile and paint Armenians black, Hamparian believes the actual figure could be as high as \$10 million.

Financially, the battle is asymmetrical. ANCA certainly doesn't have anything close to the petrodollar-infused budget of the Azeris. Hamparian and his organization engage the Azeris through a deft utilization of funds, through technology, and through a strong network of activists and grassroots supporters.

To combat the Azeri campaign, "we had to develop 'radar,'" says Hamparian. "As soon as legislation is introduced anywhere in the US, we get to know about it through a tracking system. We alert and mobilize our activists and the community in general."

These Azeri legislative initiatives aren't the only arenas where the Azeri lobby and the ANCA battle. The latter was instrumental in blocking Turcophile Matthew Byrza's appointment US ambassador to Azerbaijan. As a result of the Armenian organization's targeted campaign, the White House declined to even mention the Khojaly battle in its public response, although the Azeri lobby had managed to accrue the requisite 100,000- signature on-line petition to trigger a reply from the US administration. In the past year, thanks to such muscular efforts five states have recognized the independence of the Republic of Artsakh. The ANCA also organizes Capitol Hill programs celebrating the

independence of Artsakh which feature influential politicians such as Congressman Ed Royce.

Hamparian says ANCA's job has become more difficult because of the Crimean crisis. Azerbaijan is now promoting itself as a strategic partner to the West and an alternative source to Russian gas. "Baku claims its Southern Gas Corridor can rival Russia's Nord Stream," says the executive director of the ANCA.

Boy Scouts may believe that truth wins at the end, but politics doesn't operate on that premise. Many politicians are purchasable commodities; the justness of the Armenian Cause is of little consequence in the political/diplomatic esplanade. Campaign contributions, all-expense paid junkets, front-row seats to sports matches... are the sure way to the hearts of many pols. The other is public pressure.

It's obvious that Azeri influence in Washington is posed to grow. Hamparian knows that a battle royal is looming between his organization and the Turkbeijan lobby. Armenians who believe the battle being waged between Armenians and the 90-million Turkbeijan twins is important should support our lobbyists. We can't afford to be armchair Armenians, and merely celebrate the victories won on our behalf by a small band of dedicated American-Armenians. We should learn from Barsoumian, Asatryan, Philian Mar, and the Martirosians. We should contribute financially to Hye Tadd and when the call comes for letter writing, petitions or any other type of pro-Armenian drive we should respond promptly. The cause we help is our own.

