

A PROMISING DUAL EFFORT

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It took almost 20 years following the tragic events of the '50s (particularly in Lebanon) for Diaspora Armenians to finally see eye-to-eye and start thinking about Pan-Armenianism in practice. Probably the establishment of the Association of the Armenian University Graduates in Beirut in the '70s was that concrete example of the trend which heralded the start of the healing process of our self-inflicted wounds. Several conventions, held in Paris and elsewhere, initiated by Rev. James Karnusian were a search for a formula around which Armenians could gather together. Then, of course, the policy of "positive neutrality" during the civil war in Lebanon helped solidify the trend. In recent years the announcement of the infamous Protocols provided an impetus to carry forward the task of organizing the Diaspora in a manner that would reflect its priorities and assert itself on the international scene. Lastly, the forthcoming 100th Anniversary of the Genocide of the Armenians has subconsciously imparted urgency to activities aimed at unity, if not in organization in principles.

Overall while Diaspora wants to move forward and meet the challenges of today and tomorrow in a unified manner, there still persists a sector which harps on divisions, enumerates failed attempts and shortfalls in technicalities as arguments, and thus hinders progress. Excuses abound why unity cannot be achieved. In most cases these are symptomatic of a predisposition to inaction. Fortunately, there is no scarcity of people who, despite being skeptic, are willing to share their experiences with well-documented discourses, pointing out the pitfalls and what to look for when establishing an entity manifesting unity of purpose.

In recent years Keghart.com has devoted many words to the subject of unity and about recent initiatives, singling out Harut Sassounian's proposal of "an Elective Democratic Diaspora Structure" (EDDS) and the "Western Armenian National Congress" (WAN-C). These earnest activities, representing two concepts, almost coincided and led to confusion among some readers.

The "Elective Democratic Diaspora Structure" refers strictly to Armenians living in the Diaspora. It plans to create an entity from bottom up through ballot--on the one person one vote principle. It proposes to deal with all the problems that the Diaspora faces, including but not limited, to social, educational, political and genocide issues along with HAI TAD. There is no illusion among adherents that such a task is not of Herculean proportions. However, it is heartening to hear from Sassounian himself: *"I am continuing my private discussions with all sorts of people, including heads of Armenian organizations. Recently, I made important headway with the leader of a major organization. I will continue my efforts in this regard, until the worldwide structure becomes a reality."*

Meanwhile, in less than two weeks, a group of Ottoman-Armenian survivors' descendants will convene in Sèvres, the famed suburb of Paris, to lay the cornerstone of the "Western Armenian National Congress." Attendees will come from the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, and Australia, in addition to representatives from Armenia, Artsakh and the Russian Federation descended from Genocide survivors. Ostensibly the primary goal of WAN-C is to be *"a legitimate representational institution that can negotiate for the rights of the victims of genocide and their descendants"* in

international institutions. Unlike EDDS, the promoters are intellectuals, diplomats, politicians, historians, journalists, businessmen and activists.

Obviously, in contrast to EDDS the "Congress" has an "elitist" approach at least in its initial formative phase of establishment, but it is proposed that delegates will be "elected" by communities in the future. In June of this year an attempt was made to create such a possible prototype, based on democratic principles. 120 people, some representing various compatriotic associations, convened in Moscow and elected 40 delegates by secret ballot. They were from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Doni Rostov, Vladikavkaz, Sochi, Adler, Krasnodar, Omsk, Petrozavodsk, Vladivostok, Crimea and Abkhazia.

Keghart.com team and its friends welcome both above initiatives despite several reservations we have aired about WAN-C. Ultimately, one has to "work in the garden." Only by getting involved and exchanging opinion can change occur. The sidelines are a dead end. A number of close friends have pointed out that these may lead to "two divergent, separate efforts" implying that supporting one or the other may be perceived as being pro or anti the other. We prefer to look at it differently. Yes, they are "separate efforts" and there are dissimilarities, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Dissimilarities emanate from the goals that each supports and the composition of membership.

1.EDDS ideally would like to be a representative body of Diaspora Armenians, as pointed out above; WAN-C proposes to represent only the descendants of Genocide survivors wherever they are.

2.EDDS plans to deal with a whole array of issues that face the Armenian Diaspora, while WAN-C limits itself primarily to being an entity pursuing our rights beyond recognition of the Genocide.

3.EDDS is a populist democratic body that will involve people from all walks of life. Being a specialized entity WAN-C can't claim the same membership numbers as EDDS, but may garner vast popular support provided it walks the talk.

An area where the two "efforts" may converge is in the most crucial matter--HAI TAD and all related issues. We hope WAN-C will be established as planned and over the coming years amass an invaluable experience for all concerned, not excluding RoA, the traditional Armenian political parties and EDDS when "it becomes a reality." Supporting WAN-C does not exclude participation in EDDS and vice versa. WAN-C has the potential of acting as a complementary entity to already existing organizations or individuals who are pursuing HAI TAD, with the difference that the undertaking will be more specialized and focused.

No single existing or proposed organization can be without fault; the contemplated congress or EDDS will be far from being perfect. However, to limit failures and pitfalls it's essential to participate in either initiative with an eye on "*progressive democratization, transparency of efforts, focused approach to issues at hand*" as a close friend of Keghart.com Viken L. Attarian of Montreal would say.

