

FUNDAMENTALS OF ARMENIAN IDENTITY

Posted on December 11, 2008 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



Armen Ayvazyan PhD, Yerevan, Armenia

In the current most complex period of development of Armenia and the Armenians, the problem of the Armenian identity represents not only an academic interest but has a serious practical significance. A strong national identity is a strategic asset in the process of building and strengthening a nation-state, while the dilution of national identity by no means facilitates but, moreover, hinders the consolidation of the individual and society around national goals and objectives.

Armen Ayvazyan PhD, Yerevan, Armenia

In the current most complex period of development of Armenia and the Armenians, the problem of the Armenian identity represents not only an academic interest but has a serious practical significance. A strong national identity is a strategic asset in the process of building and strengthening a nation-state, while the dilution of national identity by no means facilitates but, moreover, hinders the consolidation of the individual and society around national goals and objectives.

After all, who can be considered Armenian today? As sensitive as this question is, since it touches the feelings of millions of people (especially our compatriots abroad), answering it is imperative. For an adequate illustration of the topic let us first present the state of affairs which the Armenian nation finds itself in today.

There are some irrefutable realities which we must see and accept exactly as they stand, rather than turn a blind eye to them, as do a significant section of the Armenians, including its "elite".

Thus:

Fact 1: The Armenian ethnicity is under the threat of extinction on the territory of its own homeland – in the Republic of Armenia, Artsakh and Javakhk. This threat springs simultaneously from a number of interrelated sources:

- a) *the possibility of military aggression by Azerbaijan;*
- b) *a critical demographic crisis (the exodus of over a million Armenian citizens and the ongoing emigration negatively impact the viability of all spheres of life in the country);*
- c) *the stalling of Armenian nation/state building process as well as the solidification of its political institutions;*
- d) *uncultivated state of Armenia's National Security doctrine ("The Armenian National Security Strategy" adopted in February 2007 is a declarative document, which, according to official announcements, has been written with the "methodology" and "editorship" of Moscow, Washington and Brussels experts). Consequently, there is a conspicuous absence of a clear Foreign Policy Direction based on national interests.*
- e) *Armenia's heavy dependence on foreign powers;*
- f) *social tension, including the class and regional aspects (inter alia, the artificially created but effectively maintained dangerous antagonism between "hayastantsi" and "gharabaghtsi", the total mistrust towards politicians and political institutions, the alienation of the people from the decision-making process);*
- g) *the complete absence of any struggle against corruption which pervades all spheres of public life in the republic;*
- h) *the lack of a consistent language policy in Armenia, resulting in a defenseless and vulnerable state of the Armenian*

language;

i) The Georgian state policy of forcing out Armenians from Javakhk using administrative, economic, cultural, religious, linguistic and demographic pressures, and now even through open show and use of force.

Yet, the foremost threat is characterized by the highly probable Azerbaijani aggression, which is being methodically planned and scrupulously prepared, with Turkey's direct and indirect participation. If it were to succeed ending in the occupation of Artsakh and the liberated territory around it, the disappearance of the Republic of Armenia from the world map would be inevitable because the next, if not simultaneous, attack will be directed against Syunik - the last dividing bastion between these two Turkic allies. The existence of Syunik, without the shielding "barrier" of Artsakh, would become untenable. The weak communication links with central regions of Armenia, the absence of any defensive depth putting all of Syunik within range of Azerbaijan's modern artillery systems, as well as the psychological trauma from the fall of Artsakh would reduce the defensibility of this strategically vital region to nearly zero. The resulting encirclement of the remainder of Armenia in a Turkish-Azerbaijani ring, will transform it into a ghetto - a kind of Transcaucasian Swaziland. Subsequently, the obliteration of Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey, if not through military action, then through economic, political and psychological pressures, will simply be a matter of time. Thus being deprived of any prospects for sustainable development and losing its role as a potential safe haven for the millions of Armenians scattered throughout the world, the resulting geometrically progressed mass emigration would weaken Armenia to the degree of being divided by and absorbed into Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Although the Armenian nation succeeded in eliminating this very scenario in the 1990s, the Turco-Azeri alliance, far from forsaking it, will attempt to implement it if Armenians prove unable to mount an effective resistance.

Fact 2: Armenians can survive only if Armenia survives - as an Armenian state and the Armenian nation living within it.

Fact 3: Without Armenia, the Armenian Spyurk (Diaspora) cannot represent a nation, i.e., a viable entity ensuring national preservation and reproduction of Armenian race (let alone the preservation and development of the Armenian language and culture).

Fact 4: During the last decades the inevitable acculturation and assimilation processes in Spyurk have sharply accelerated to an unprecedented level. In particular, as a result of emigration, every year the ranks of the Armenian communities are thinning out in the Middle East, where until recently the percentage of mixed marriages were extremely low, and the Armenian schools and other community structures functioned effectively. In 20-30 years from now there will remain at best tiny islands of the once flourishing communities of Lebanon, Iran and Syria, similar to what has already happened to the Armenians of Iraq. As for the Armenians living in Russia and the developed West, they are subject to even faster acculturation and assimilation.

Fact 5: There is no Armenian culture without the Armenian language. Along with the statehood and the territory under its control, the language is the foundation and paramount means of preserving the Armenian ethnicity. The fact that many of our compatriots, especially in Spyurk, can feel and consider themselves Armenian without knowing the Armenian language, is possible only thanks to the people of Armenia who still speak, write and create in Armenian. Let us picture a hypothetical situation where Armenians in Armenia have forgotten their mother tongue and communicate with one another, are educated, write and create in a foreign language, no matter which - Russian, English or Chinese.

~~This would signify nothing less than the end of the Armenian civilization, the end of the Armenian culture and the end of the Armenian ethnos!~~

Yet, today Armenia itself faces the full weight of the challenge of preserving and developing the Armenian language (i.e. culture). As was mentioned earlier, this is due to the decrease in the number of users of the Armenian language (including the potential users - children who received and receive non-Armenian education abroad) attributable to the emigration of our compatriots and the absence of appropriate protection of the Armenian language by the State. After 16 years of independence, it is high time that we duly acknowledge the fundamental role and place that language has in the life of a nation - something that the Armenian political elite and a significant portion of the intelligentsia fail to do. On the contrary, in the language policy, just like in certain other fundamental areas, attempts are still being made to regress the Armenian political thinking.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: The Armenian nation is in the active phase of the struggle for survival on a fraction of its own homeland, preserved at the cost of unimaginable sacrifices. In other words, the Armenian nation is a struggling organism whose main, vitally important function is the struggle for survival.

Conclusion 2: The frontlines of this struggle for survival stretch out not only along Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, but evidently also throughout the country itself, embracing the spheres of demography, economy, social life, science and education. Emigration, regardless of its reasons, removes Armenians, partially or fully, from the central battlefield for survival, that is - Armenia. Repatriation, on the other hand, results in the replenishment of a vitally necessary reserve for the country.

Based on the above-mentioned strategic considerations I will attempt to answer the question: "who is an Armenian?" and in what way is s/he differentiated from an Armenian by birth.

One is an Armenian if s/he:

- 1) *considers Armenia his/her only homeland within two dimensions of time and territory - in her historic and present boundaries;*
- 2) *has strong psychological attachments to his homeland - its territory, people, language and culture;*
- 3) *feels personal responsibility for Armenia's fate and assumes political obligations towards it;*
- 4) *if living abroad, seriously contemplates avenues for his and his family's repatriation;*
- 5) *either is or tries to become the bearer of the Armenian language and culture;*
- 6) *strives to maintain his offsprings Armenian, including by means of passing on to them the knowledge of the Armenian language and by bringing them into the realm of the national culture.*

Those of our compatriots who consider the country of their birth or citizenship and not Armenia as their homeland, who do not feel psychological attachments and political responsibility towards Armenia, who do not wish to think about living in the Homeland, who do not seek to be the bearers of the Armenian language, who consciously or unconsciously have reconciled with and are not concerned about the inevitable assimilation of their offsprings, can be considered Armenians by origin only, because, in reality, they are already either cosmopolitans or representatives of another

nationality. Indeed, it does not matter at all if they shout from the rooftops that they are the most real and authentic Armenians (a genuine self-deception!). The fact is that these individuals, regardless of the reasons, are beyond the nation's life-process and do not partake in its subsistence even at its most fateful moment.

It should also be emphasized that genetics are of a secondary importance in determining of an Armenian or any other national identity. The real identity of an individual is defined by his personal involvement in and contribution to the life processes of the relevant nation.

Thus, we should differentiate between an Armenian on the one hand, and a person of Armenian origin on the other. This does not mean at all that the former is good and the latter is bad. Simply, the latter no longer can or wants to sacrifice anything for the sake of Armenia and already has a fundamentally different national self-consciousness.

For Armenians by origin it would be useful perhaps to look at themselves honestly and without self-deception and hypocrisy: They have actually left the field of the nation's life activities. Nevertheless, the road is still open for them both ways - total and irreversible assimilation or the return to national roots, the rediscovery of the Armenian language and culture and participation in the nation's life. In this sense, a large segment of Spyurk are potential Armenians. Unfortunately, such alienated potential Armenians are not rare in Armenia itself, who are fully or partially cut off from the Armenian language, culture and politics and who fail to perceive the common threat of extinction facing all Armenians.

I would like to repeat what I have written about many times before. Preserving Armenianness abroad, "hayapahpanum", cannot be an end in/of itself. The true goal for the preservation of Diasporan Armenians is their reunion with their motherland under the auspices of an independent state, as of now on the territory under the control of Armenian armed forces. Considering the preservation of Armenianness an end goal (as a considerable part of the Armenians abroad does) severely weakens the most important elements of the same "hayapahpanum."

The struggle for physical survival is unfortunately the core function of life of the Armenian nation. It is this very function that determines and necessitates the fundamental pillar of the Armenian identity - direct and personal engagement in this struggle for the realisation of the national objectives, which presently are:

- *the preservation at all cost of that territory, essential for security, on which Armenia (RA and NKR together with the liberated territory around it) has existed for the whole period of its latest independence;*
- *the increasing of the number of the Armenian population in the Homeland;*
- *the preservation of the Armenians of Javakhk on their lands;*
- *the building of a nation-state based on the principles of rule of law, social justice, democracy and protection of national interests and values, including the development of the Armenian language and culture.*

There are tremendous practical, ideological and psychological obstacles and ossified stereotypes that must be overcome throughout this struggle. They emanate essentially from non-Armenian sources but are often coming in to the scene through those Armenian political structures which long ago or recently have fallen under the slavish dependence of foreign powers. The engagement in the struggle for the achievement of the above-mentioned objectives will underpin an Armenian's ethnic resistibility with such a breath of emotions, feelings and knowledge that he/she will indeed have the drive and the need to acquire and become the bearer of the basic elements of the national

~~self-consciousness – the language, culture, customs and traditions.~~

To sum up, we can conclude that as long as Armenia as a nation and state is drawn into a long-term struggle for survival against powers superior in terms of numbers, resources and territory (Turkey and Azerbaijan), the most natural and functionally strongest ethnically differentiating characteristic feature of an Armenian is the acknowledgment and assumption of personal responsibility - proportionate to his/her strengths and capabilities - for destiny of the homeland.

