

MPP ARIS BABIKIAN'S INTERVIEW WITH KEGHART.ORG

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In an exclusive interview with Keghart.org, [MPP Aris Babikian](#) of Toronto (the first Armenian member of a Canadian provincial legislature), talks about the recent fraught relations between the RoA and the Diaspora, how to normalize those relations, and how the Diaspora can help Armenia and Artsakh confront Turkish pressure and Azeri aggression. Babikian also talks about Armenian contributions to Canada, prominent Armenian Canadians, and the history of Armenians in Canada.

What is your assessment of the relationship between the Republic of Armenia and the Diasporas in the West, especially the Canadian Diaspora?

After the fall of the Soviet Union and Armenia's independence, the diaspora diverted its attention to the homeland and to Artsakh. They put all their resources to transform the homeland to the country they had advocated to see over 70 years. They did that with the full knowledge and conviction that a strong homeland is the only guarantee of the Armenian nation's continued existence.

Regrettably, since the second Artsakh war in 2020, relations between the Diaspora and the current Armenian administration have been at their lowest point. The policies of the current RoA administration and the constant losses have demoralized the diaspora. In these difficult and challenging times, the Government of Armenia should have adopted wiser policies vis-à-vis the Diaspora. Instead of collaborating and coordinating policies with the entire Diaspora and its institutions, they chose a divisive approach by appointing a controversial individual with no clout with Armenian communities, governments, legislative assemblies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international fora to be interlocutors. This policy is doomed to failure. You cannot ignore decades of experienced Diaspora organizations with a record of accomplishments because they might not agree with your approach. The Canadian Diaspora is one of the most vibrant and successful communities. It can contribute in many ways to the prosperity of the homeland. Regrettably, it is experiencing the same challenges the rest of the Diaspora is facing regarding their stressful relationship with the homeland's administration.

How can the Diaspora support RoA and Artsakh to confront Turkish pressure and Azeri aggression?

The Armenian Diaspora is one of the most effective and powerful diasporas around the world. There are few nations which have similar diaspora as the Armenians. These nations know that the diasporas are one of the most important assets to enhance their friendly bilateral relations with the said diaspora's host country, advance the homeland prosperity, and promote a positive image of the homeland. The Armenian Diaspora has a proven record of advocacy on behalf of Armenian causes and issues. The Diaspora has established a large network of supporters, friends, and alliances around the world. The Armenian Diaspora can help the RoA in political, economic, scientific, geopolitical, legal, educational and so many other spheres. To utilize all that, you need a government, which appreciates the valuable assets it has in its Diaspora and extend cooperation.

Many diasporas envy the Armenians for having such a disciplined and effective diaspora.

As we have seen in the last few years, Armenia's opponents--Azerbaijan and Turkey--are united in their efforts to usurp Artsakh and Armenia. They have created military, economic, lobbying, and government relations pacts. They openly admit that they are "One Nation in Two States". What did Armenia do to counterbalance this hostile and belligerent attitude? Armenia alienated its most precious commodity by its divisive policy. It distanced itself from the Diaspora and alienated the overwhelming majority of Diasporans from the homeland. Furthermore, the current government in Armenia started dismantling and undermining centuries-old precious symbols of the Armenian nationhood and existence.

The Armenian Diaspora is able and willing to help the RoA prevent the looming disaster engineered by its two neighbours. The only power the RoA can count on is the Diaspora. Seeking protection from Russia, Europe, and United States is an in vain effort. These so-called mediators are looking after their own interest, not the interest of RoA or Armenians. How can one expect Europe to be a neutral mediator when Ursula von der Leyen signed a multi-billion-dollar gas agreement and praised the Azeri dictator as a "crucial", "reliable, and trustworthy partner." Similarly Russia. It has sold out Armenia to appease its ally Turkey. The Ukraine invasion made Russia dependent on Turkey.

The Diaspora can utilize its political, financial, legal, social, and other tools to expose the hypocritical politicians who are giving Armenia lip service by issuing worthless condemnation statements and resolutions. If the international community is serious, it should sanction Azerbaijan, stop economic and financial dealings with the despotic regimes, stop military cooperation and the sale of equipment to Azerbaijan and Turkey, declare Azeri diplomats persona non grata, and initiate urgent airlift to the residents of Artsakh.

All this can happen when the Armenian Government gets serious and ditches its misguided foreign policy, and turn toward its genuine allies, the Diaspora and Iran.

How can the Diaspora bypass the internal political dichotomy in RoA to regain its role as a lobbyist for Armenian national causes?

The current government has suppressed its internal opposition in the legislative assembly of Armenia and in society. It has curtailed the freedom of the media and undermined the judiciary. It has used its majority in Parliament to dictate its policies. It is up to the people of Armenia to address the current political impasse. When Armenian activists around the world try to sensitize their politicians on the current hostile stand of Turkey and Azerbaijan, the blockade of Artsakh, and the Azeri army's occupation of sovereign Armenia territory, the politicians say they cannot do much because the Armenian government is negotiating with Azerbaijan. The policies of the Government of Armenia are handicapping Diaspora's effectiveness. We are cognisant that Armenia needs to have peaceful and flourishing relations with all its neighbours. This relationship must be based on mutual respect, upholding the Artsakh people self-determination wish, maintaining the historical facts, and

guarantee the safety and security of the people of Artsakh and Armenia. A peace based on the humiliation and subjugation of one side, as Azerbaijan and Turkey are aiming for, is not a lasting, just and durable peace.

The Armenian Government should re-evaluate its relationship with the Diaspora and call for an urgent consultation with Armenian institutions everywhere, to define a new covenant between Armenia, the Diaspora and Artsakh so that the Armenian nation with all its sectors can speak, coordinate, and act in unison.

The creation of an international association of Diaspora elected officials, regardless of their political affiliation or orientation, would be another asset that can help the RoA.

Are there efforts to coordinate and maybe unify the work of Armenian politicians who function in Canada, the U.S., France, Lebanon, etc...

I am not aware of such efforts. Maybe it is time, as I suggested in my previous answer. I think there is an urgent need to create a world inter-parliamentary Armenian Association to coordinate the political activities of the Diaspora.

Are there political, diplomatic and lobbying cooperative initiatives between the RoA and the Diaspora? If not, why not? What are the main obstacles for cooperation?

In the past, there was such coordination between the diaspora and the foreign Ministry of Armenia. I participated in such a conference. As far as I know, since 2018 these fora have been eliminated. The current Armenian administration has undermined arrangements and understandings of highly valuable diaspora government and lobbying organizations' efforts by distancing itself from the diaspora and has solicited the cooperation of incompetent and discredited individuals. These decisions have negatively impacted Diaspora's political power and created friction within Diaspora communities.

At a time when Turkey's emboldened nationalists and fascists threaten Armenia and at a time when the Azeri dictator threatens Armenia almost every day and states Yerevan is an Azeri vilayat, the Armenian nation needs its collective forces to unite to prevent the New Ottoman Empire from usurping Armenia.

The current government unwise policies are the reason for the current breakdown between the Government of Armenia and the Diaspora. The Diaspora is willing to cooperate with the government. For the Diaspora the survival and prosperity of the homeland is paramount. The current government is temporary. The homeland is a lasting entity. It is not too late to wake up and see the dangers surrounding Armenia and Artsakh. Even though the Armenian nation has suffered major setbacks, we still have the time to prevent further major catastrophe. The Armenian nation is at the edge of the abyss. Unless we put our differences aside and work together to preserve what we have, future generations and historians will damn us for losing the Armenian state which our people have



Third from left Ontario Premier Doug Ford, then HE Anahit Harutyunyan, next MPP Aris Babikian surrounded by cabinet ministers

What is the purpose of the [Armenian Heritage Month](#)?

Ontario is home to more than 100,000 people of Armenian heritage. Armenians began migrating to Canada in the 1880s. The first Armenian to do so was Garabed Nergarian, who settled in Port Hope, Ontario in 1887. Approximately 37 Armenians came to Ontario in 1892 and 100 more settled in the province in 1895. After the Hamidian massacres of the mid-1890s, Armenian families began settling in greater numbers in Ontario. Decades later, approximately 2,000 survivors of the 1915 Armenian Genocide — mostly women and children — came to Canada as refugees.

By proclaiming the month of May as Armenian Heritage Month, the Province of Ontario recognizes the significant impact that Ontario Armenians have had on Ontario's social, cultural, educational, economic, and political institutions, as well as their contributions to art, science and literature in the

province. **Armenian Heritage Month** is an opportunity to educate Ontarians about the struggles and achievements of Armenian Canadians in a society that respects freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These core values have contributed to the strength and diversity of Ontario.

You succeeded in proclaiming May as Armenian Heritage Month in Ontario by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. How did you achieve the feat? Did you face any resistance? If yes, who from and how did you tackle the opposition?

This is a sensitive issue. Due to the support of the Premier of Ontario Doug Ford and the House Leader Paul Calandra, we were able to schedule the Second Reading, Committee Hearing, and Third Reading at the same day on March 29, 2022. The presence of the Committee of the Whole House was a precedent, because it was the first time in 26 years of history of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario that such a session took place.

What activities were held in May 2023 to observe Armenian Heritage in Ontario? What activities do you foresee in the coming years?

On May 29, 2023, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario held the inaugural celebration at the Legislative Assembly building. The Premier of Ontario, Cabinet Minister and a large number of Members of the Legislative Assembly from all parties joined the Armenian communities of the GTA, Cambridge, St. Catharines, and Ottawa. Armenia's Ambassador to Canada, H.E. Ms. Anahit Harutyunyan traveled from Ottawa to attend this historic day. The general election of 2022 in Ontario delayed the celebration to 2023. On this occasion 20 page booklet was published to inform the gathered about the history of Armenians in Ontario, the Georgetown Boys History, list of prominent Ontario Armenians who contribute to different walks of life in Ontario, including the Canadian Army and the two world wars.

For next years, I hope that various Armenian Community organizations in different cities, will initiate and plan cultural, educational, and other activities to first of all educate the future generation of Ontario-Armenian about their predecessors role in building the community and their influence on Ontario. Furthermore, it is important to sensitize Ontario residents with our history in Ontario and Canada.

Did you receive support from Ontario's Armenian community? If yes, what type of support? If not, why not?

As the First Armenian to be elected to any provincial parliament in Canada, it was my honour to sponsor Bill 105, An Act to proclaim the month of May as Armenian Heritage Month. It was a daunting job to organize this event. Many individual Armenians contributed to the research of the booklet, provide the cultural displays and performances by volunteering their time to help organize the event and be on hand to guide the guests in the Legislative Assembly.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to The Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford; Minister Long

Term Care Paul Calandra; Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce; MPPs Logan Kanapathi, Lisa MacLeod, Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos, Vincent Ke, Gurratan Singh, H.E. Ms. Anahit Harutyunyan; Ambassador Extraordinary, and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Armenia to Canada, Sevag Avakian; Artistic Director and Chorographer of Sassoun Dance Ensemble, Prof. Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, Jirair Jerry Tutunjian, Carl Georgian, Atom Egoyan, Nazar Chatalian (Lavash and Lahmajoun Factory), Armand and Hovic Boyadjian (Arz Fine Foods), Valdimir Grouzman (United Star Corporation), Simon Hasserjian, Lynne Chichakian, Meghri Hajinian, Sevan Hajinian, Hasmig Kherlakian, Khoren Mardoyan, and WorldEx Ltd.

Is there a permanent body that will "manage" future May celebrations?

On an annual basis, I will organize the Legislative Assembly celebration. I am hoping that the Armenian community in Ontario to form a collation to organize the celebrations to showcase the different aspects of the Armenian community in Ontario. As Ontario Armenians, we have so much to be proud of and we need to sensitize our neighbours, classmates, business associates, art societies, and our ethnocultural stakeholders.

How do you assess the level of participation and involvement of Canadians of Armenian heritage in local politics?

Even though we excel in many aspects of Canadian society and we contribute above our weight, unfortunately, we have huge deficit in the political sphere with the lack of involvement of Armenian individuals. We need to encourage the youths to become more active and participate in every aspect of politics.

Keghart.org thanks Mr. Babikian and wishes him success in his endeavours to serve Canada and the Armenians.

Comments



R. Zaven Gudsuz – 2023-07-04 22:05:46

Ոչինչ կը սպասեմ անձէ մը, որ կը դիմէ գանատական իշխանութիւններուն որպէսզի միջամտեն Հայաստանի արդարութեան համակարգին մօտ՝ Քոչարեանը ազատագրելու համար: Կարծես խորհրդարանին մէջ պատգամաւորն է հայկական կուսակցութեան մը և ոչ հայ համայնքին: