IS IT NECESSARY TO LIVE IN ARMENIA TO REMAIN ARMENIAN?

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By Viken L. Attarian MSc MBA, Mount Royal, Quebec, 2 July 2009

The following is one of the commentaries that was circulated to members of 24 April Forum (Canada) as part of a general discussion related to identity issues. This excerpt is posted with the permission of the author.

While I agree with many of the points made, especially about the dire straits of our compatriots in Armenia, yet I would like to respectfully disagree that one can live as an Armenian **only** on Armenian soil. Here is why

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While I agree with many of the points made, especially about the dire straits of our compatriots in Armenia, yet I would like to respectfully disagree that one can live as an Armenian **only** on Armenian soil. Here is why

1. Historically, Cilicia was NOT Armenian land, yet we lived there as Armenians and even thrived for centuries.

2. We have been able to live as Armenians in Jerusalem (not Armenian soil) for probably two thousand years, literally saying mass every day in the Holy Places. That is 2000 x 365 times, give or take a few days. A very impressive record by any measure.

3. A strong sense of Armenian nationalism and identity had developed in the communities in India (not Armenia), granted they have disappeared, but they also have a recorded thriving existence for a couple of centuries.

4. The two centers of our Armenian national renaissance of identity have been Tbilisi and Constantinople (not Armenia). The latter, even after the Genocide, still holds arguably to this day a strong place in the forming of our psyche with its continuing institutions.

5. The Mekhitarists, almost single-handedly resurrected and created the Western Armenian language, culture and intellectual identity, without even setting foot on Armenian soil. Their legacy survives today across the world. Father Ghevont Alishan, probably the greatest of the writer-thinker-scholar Mekhitarists who championed a fiery nationalism and longing for everything Armenian, never set foot on Armenian lands even for an hour.

6. Many of our great institutions, such as the AGBU were founded by people who lived as Armenians and yet they never lived on Armenian soil.

7. Almost every single genocide survivor (outside Turkey) lived the rest of their lives as Armenians

but NOT on Armenian soil. Most of them also died in foreign lands, but they died as Armenians.

Furthermore, even framing the debate along these lines strikes me as ignoring the following:

a) If we accept such a premise that one can only live one's identity within the geographical confines of a nation-state, we forget the fact that nation-states are relatively new political constructs not much older than perhaps three centuries. Most nation states of today would be unthinkable in biblical times, or within the time frames of history associated with what being an Armenian actually means.

b) If we accept such a premise, even Ms Pomerantz would be logically contradictory; After all, if the only place to live one's "Jewishness" is in Israel, then therefore Jews have not been "Jewish" for two millennia, because Israel did NOT exist during that period. Hence, who are these people now moving back to Israel? While Ms. Pomerantz's article can be inspiring, it is not much different than an emotional propaganda piece with Zionist overtones. Zionism is that nationalist movement, itself the child of modern nation-state based ideologies that uses such false "argumentation" to justify the creation of an identity centered uniquely on the nation-state of Israel. It essentially only argues that Israel is the alpha and omega of Jewishness. I can guarantee you that there are many Jews at odds with that statement. I personally know several.

c) Finally, there are many diasporas that exist and have continued to exist with a strong identity of their origin continuing to survive in their self-constructed ethos for generations. For example, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians, the Greeks, the Jews and of course Africans etc. etc. A lot of the keys to the multigenerational survival of these Diasporas have been already discovered. Many center around differences (e.g. racial, linguistic, religious), others are due the notion of geographical concentration and critical mass, even others are due to tribal attitudes and a siege mentality and so on, or a combination of a multitude of such factors. There is not one single reason, and the libraries of most universities in the world are full of hundreds if not thousands of research papers and materials about such topics.

My point is that the idea that one can live one's identity (whatever that may mean) outside of where one's homeland is (also whatever that may mean) is not even controversial. It is a proven and accepted fact, both in the examples I provided above and in the experience of many other people and nations.

The above of course should in no way be construed that if one desires to move to and live in Armenia it would not be a laudable thing to do in my book. It would be a great thing to do. I just do NOT see it happening realistically in the near future, at least not on such a massive scale as the organized *nerkaghts* were.