LET US NOT KID OURSELVES!

Posted on October 20, 2009 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Dikran Abrahamian BA MD, Ontario - Canada, 18 October 2009

In this short essay the term Diaspora is used to describe Armenians living in the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, and Australia, primarily because they share a common denominator: the post-traumatic syndrome of the Genocide. Furthermore, it applies only to a portion of Armenians who left Armenia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian- and Iranian-Armenians and isolated communities of Armenians living east of Iran have had their unique characteristics; their respective histories have evolved along other lines and are beyond the scope of this article.
Leaving aside the pre-repatriation (1946-'47) cleavages and their impact on the subsequent history of what evolved in the Diaspora, I shall limit myself to matters that I have personal knowledge of--through reading, following trends and issues--or participated in.

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Broadly, some dates stick out: 1956, 1958, 1975, 1996 and 2008. Each of these dates is associated with an event that has added another layer of discord, infighting, animosity, and confrontation in the Diaspora. The recent signing of the Protocols between Armenia and Turkey will probably join the significant date list.
Despite differences, there are vital topics that bind most Armenians who are **vocal**. Whether they are individuals or are represented by associations (mostly political parties), they all agree on principles that are directly related to the Genocide of the Armenians.

In a recent email exchange a valued non-Armenian correspondent requested for an explanation of the "cherished goals" of the Diaspora Armenians, making a direct quote from a previous submission to Keghart.com

My brief answer was:

"By and large the floated ideas-plans-goals, etc. may be summarized as follows:

1. Recognition of the Genocide of the Armenians by Turkey as direct inheritor of the Ottoman state

2. Reparations for life and wealth lost
3. Return of lands to the descendants of the Genocide generation.

Whether these are realistic expectations (in whole or in part) is a different matter and there is much debate about these issues within Armenian circles, mainly in the Diaspora."

The query and the response gave me the opportunity to reflect upon, once more, whether the Diaspora is determined to pursue the above goals and how realistic are they in their objectives. Is the Diaspora really capable of engaging in a long-term plan to transform wishes into realities? By themselves, announcements and lofty proclamations will lead us nowhere--as pointed out in a previous essay.

There is another unanswered question: Who really can vouch that all Diaspora Armenians or at least a majority of them are in agreement with the above goals? Perhaps the symbolic recognition of the Genocide of the Armenians by Turkey would satisfy some Armenians. Moreover, there is a sector strongly asserting that the current geopolitical climate and *realpolitik* are unfavorable and such goals amount to no more than wishful thinking in the foreseeable future.

Above arguments are countered by the assertion that the Jews were able to regain a lost land after languishing in their own diaspora for two millennia. Are we less capable to reach our goals? "Realists" point out a key difference in the Armenian vs. Jewish comparison.They state that without the global Zionist organization (which is not wholly Jewish) and the Holocaust, Israel could not have come into existence. Still others are content by a partial return of a portion of Western Armenia, with or without genocide recognition by Turkey, but substantial enough to offer Armenia a safe and secure passage to the Black Sea.

There are variations of the above. I would contend that nobody and no organization has a clue as to what proportion of Armenians wants what and which goals are considered realistic by them. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to hear that these organizations do not reflect the aspirations of the majority of the Armenians in the Diaspora.

Like wild mushrooms, new forums and groups crop up across the Diaspora landscape. Of course, the Internet is playing a major role in their proliferation. Some have semi-comprehensive plans; a good number of them are socio-political in nature, while others are cultural. One is amazed with this phenomenon when a giant of the past, such as ***Haratch***, folded recently in Paris.

Why are these groups attracting followers, albeit in limited numbers, if Diaspora Armenians felt comfortable with the traditional political organizations and the cultural associations affiliated with them? Need I mention that there is lack of an organic link between such forums and groups on one hand and the organizations on the other? Why?

The answers cannot be scientific and fact based. At best, they can be conjectures with a tinge of bias. Let me explain what I mean with an illustration.

During the recent Armenia/Turkey Protocols debate, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) and the Armenians of Australia undertook polls to measure public opinion. Both asked whether people were for or against the Protocols. Keghart.com had two polls--the first launched when the Road Map was announced, and the second when the Protocols were made public. The subject matters were basically the same.

It was not unexpected to see an overwhelming negative response in the ANCA and in the Australian polls. More than 90 percent of the respondents were against.
Meanwhile, the Keghart.com polls showed the following:

Do you support the Turkish-Armenian Agreement concluded on 22nd April 2009?

--78% said no (630 participants)

Should the Armenian Parliament ratify the protocols guiding the relations between Armenia and Turkey announced on August 31, 2009?

--71% said no (351 participants)

The discrepancy between the data collected by the ANCA and Keghart.com. is clear. Moreover, probably more people would have been in agreement with the Protocols were it not for this writer's bias against some provisions in the Protocols, thus tilting the views of readers in a certain direction.

If Diaspora political parties do not necessarily reflect the aspirations of the majority then who does? Who is capable of launching a plan which would face the new post-Protocols realities? Are our political parties capable of carrying the task single-handedly or collectively?

It is a comforting fact that at crucial moments the traditional parties (or their leaderships), not excluding Marxist-oriented formations, do come together in unison. Their unified stand of "positive neutrality" during the protracted civil war in Lebanon is a case in point. The second such occurrence took place during the recent Protocols debate.

However, as soon as relative 'calm' sets in, the above groups return to the "business as usual" mode.

A day after the unified protests against the visit of the president of Armenia to Los Angeles, a community leader stated during an interview, aired on Horizon television, that "people" would follow the political party that will successfully lead the coming "struggle".

That may be the case. But the above statement and similar expressions made by a variety of community and party leaders on various occasions reflect a certain mindset. This mindset is a sign of an egocentric attitude that is pervasive in our community life. The above statement was not made weeks or even days after the president's visit, but during a timeframe when there was seemingly a unified front. That's what is pathological and bothersome.

If each party unilaterally assumes the mantle of sole leadership, without even seeking the consent

of its members, we are doomed to repeat the blunders of the past. On this occasion the expected statement should have been an expression of unity, and not idle musings about the choice of future leadership.

Unfortunately, these are not slippages of the tongue.

Armenians, irrespective of their ideologies and affiliations, are tired of this attitude, especially the young. They have become skeptical about the objectives and effectiveness of our political parties. It's no surprise that a good number of them have coalesced around a new group in California.

How can one, in such an instance, trust political parties to lead the Diaspora to a safe haven--so to speak? Here, the reference is not to the battle for the passage of a Bill in the United States Congress which would recognize the Genocide, or similar activities. Nor it is about who controls more churches, schools or clubs. It is in regard to fundamental issues of where we are, what we really want, how we can organize as a collective to be considered **a people under international law**. It is with this overriding concern that the questions are posed--so that we don't continue to wander in the wilderness as a lost amalgamation of individuals. Typically, this writer has lived in three countries before settling in Canada. Others have crossed four or five jurisdictions prior to making home somewhere in the Diaspora.

Enough of this nonsense of unrealistic slogans and changing positions to suit immediate and self-promoting ends! Sloganeering and fancy foot-steps do not address fundamental identity and existential issues we face now.

Let us define clearly what our goals for a bright future should be. Let us consult with our respective constituents in a true democratic fashion. Let us ask for their input. And following the participation of our constituencies, let us formulate our objectives and goals, the methods we have to utilize, and our overall strategy. Let no organization deign speak on behalf of its members unless it has obtained their informed consent.

Let no organization assume that it speaks for all of Diaspora. That reminder goes to all groups, but particularly to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), because it is the dominant political organization in the Diaspora. For a variety of reasons, following the repatriation in the '40s, the ARF has enjoyed near supremacy outside Armenia. That status may not necessarily persist in the future, when Armenians who have emigrated from Armenia are factored in. Sooner or later, their voice will become more significant in the Diaspora.

If we, the Diasporan Armenians as defined in the introductory paragraph, are committed to a strong and prosperous Diaspora, let us forge a unified and realistic strategy and adhere to it, and make sure the non-affiliated members of the respective communities are involved. Time is running out with the speed of lightning. Despite all the well-intentioned activities on the ground and on the Web, there is no cohesion in the Diaspora. If we do not act now the Diaspora is destined to become a footnote in Armenian history, especially following the fourth generation of the Genocide and in the West.

Time is of the essence, and it's running out.

Let us not kid ourselves!

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