

YEREVAN'S ILL-CONCEIVED PLAN FOR AN EMBASSY IN TEL AVIV

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Prof. Markar Melkonian, Los Angeles, 19 July 2020

Last February Armenia's President Armen Sarkissian signed a decree to relocate the residence of the Armenian ambassador to Israel from its previous location in Yerevan to Tel Aviv. The decree followed a 19 September 2019 announcement by Armenia's Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan that the Republic of Armenia intends to open an embassy in Israel. This is a significant expansion of already-existing diplomatic relations between Israel and the Republic of Armenia, which were established in 1992. The decision to open an embassy in Tel Aviv was taken with little in the way of public debate or official explanation, and those whose lives will be affected by the decision remain uninformed and in the dark.

At last count, Armenia had opened embassies in only forty-five countries—fewer than one in four of the member states of the United Nations. With the 2019 announcement, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz emphasized the significance of Yerevan's decision, noting that the Republic of Armenia will be the 90th country to open an embassy there. This, Katz said, "attests to the constant increase in the strength of Israel's position in the world."

If Katz is right, then the Republic of Armenia has appeased a regime that for seventy years has violently expropriated the Palestinian people and annexed their land, and that is continuing to brutalize 6.6 million of them. Yerevan's announcement of the embassy decision came in the wake of the Gaza Border Protests of 2018 to 19, in which hundreds of unarmed Palestinian protesters, including children and medical personnel, were gunned down, many by snipers, within the borders of the crowded open-air concentration camp that is the Gaza Strip. The announcement also came on the heels of passage of the 2018 "Jewish Nation-State Law," which explicitly denies the right to self-determination to any other people on land annexed by "the Jewish state." Thus, Yerevan--which urges other countries to officially acknowledge the Armenian Genocide--has handed a diplomatic victory to a regime that is ethnically cleansing Palestine of its native population.

On 15 March, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Speaker of the highest legislative body of the Islamic Republic and Special Aide for International Affairs, went on record to warn that Yerevan's embassy decision "is in conflict with the interests of the Palestinian people and will negatively impact the stability and security of the region" (Tasnim News Agency, 16 March 2020). Tehran has every reason to be concerned: the current administration in Yerevan has taken a further step to expand relations with a nuclear-armed state dedicated to destroying the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, Yerevan's decision took place in the aftermath of Donald Trump's unilateral abrogation of the 2015 Iran-U.S. nuclear deal, and while Iran is trying to cope with severe economic sanctions that, among other things, have impeded the delivery of medical supplies to the people of that country, even as they have been struggling to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Tehran has for decades quietly engaged in mutually beneficial commercial, cultural, and technical exchanges with Armenia. Moreover, the Iranians have pursued even-handed diplomacy when it

comes to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, and they have done so in the face of great pressure not to. Iran has been a force of restraint and moderation in the region, and it has been a good neighbor to Armenia. The embassy decision imperils all of this, dropping another obstacle in the way of commercial, transportation and technological relations with Iran.

It is no secret that, for thirty years, neoconservative Friends of Israel in Washington have been working to isolate Armenia from Iran. With the embassy decision, Yerevan has stumbled right into the steel trap that Washington's neocons have laid for them.

In late June, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeated that he would begin the process of officially annexing 30 percent of the West Bank. In response, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell announced in a letter to the U.N. Security Council that "unilateral annexation would inevitably have legal consequences for the international community's relations with Israel." A joint statement by six current and incoming European members of the Security Council echoed Borrell's statement (Associated Press/Los Angeles Times, 24 June. 2020). Thus, having chosen to draw closer to Israel, Yerevan has sent the Republic of Armenia 180 degrees in the opposite direction of "the international community."

Meanwhile, Israeli occupiers continue to trounce Palestinian Armenians, steal Armenian church property, arm Azerbaijan, spit on Armenian priests (literally), and deny the Armenia genocide. Undeterred, Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigor Hovhannisyan has seen fit to apologize to his Israeli "counterparts" that he could not open the embassy in Jerusalem, rather than Tel Aviv (Jerusalem Post 20 September 2019). This, presumably, is Yerevan's idea of a "balanced foreign policy."

Israel has for decades massively fomented regional instability. Since 1947, it has provoked no fewer than eight regional wars and launched a long succession of bombing campaigns, terrorism, kidnappings and "reprisal operations," from Jordan to Tunisia and from Iraq to Egypt. Since 1955, Israel has been in violation of 77 UN resolutions—more than the rest of the world combined--and just in the year 2018, the United Nations issued a total of 27 condemnations, 21 of which were against Israel. And then there is the matter of escalating repression in the West Bank from 1987 to the present, as well as four large-scale Israeli military offensives against civilians in the densely populated Gaza Strip since 2008 alone.

Israeli destabilization is not limited to Palestine. Israel developed and tested nuclear weapons, in partnership with its strategic ally and ideological twin, the Republic of South Africa. Today, Israel possesses at least 100 nuclear weapons, deployed in aircraft, ballistic missiles, and submarines. It has never signed or ratified the Biological Weapons Convention; it has signed but never ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, and it is not a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (the NPT). Citing its self-proclaimed "exceptional status," Israel has refused to sign the NPT and has rejected repeated resolutions of the General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency to open

its facilities to IAEA inspectors. Thanks to diplomatic immunity courtesy of the USA, Israel has evaded international regulation of its nuclear arsenal and continues to deploy nuclear weapons with impunity.

Then there is the matter of Israeli attacks against non-military nuclear facilities. Operation Scorched Sword, on 30 September 1980, was the first time in history that any country had ever attacked a nuclear reactor, and it set a very dangerous precedent. In Operation Opera, on 7 June 1981, Israel attacked a nuclear power station that was under construction just 17 kilometers southwest of Baghdad--a city that had a population of 3.14 million at the time. Operation Outside the Box, on 6 September 2007, destroyed a Syrian nuclear reactor near Deir ez-Zor, killing perhaps ten facility workers, and releasing an undetermined amount of radiation.

After each one of its attacks against nuclear facilities, Israel remained unscathed by any criticism and undeterred by any sanctions. (On the topic of impunity, see: Marjorie Cohn, "Trump Is Trying to Hide US and Israeli War Crimes by Attacking the International Criminal Court," truthout.org, 8 July 2002.) In this case, as in many others, appeasement has led to further aggression. On 2 July, for example, Israel attacked the Natanz nuclear facility near Isfahan, Iran, causing fires and explosions, and largely destroying the facility. Thus, just two weeks ago Israel committed yet another act of war against Iran. (Unlike Israel, Iran does not possess nuclear weapons; it is a signatory of the NPT, and it has permitted regular IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities.)

The embassy decision is in conflict not only with the Palestinian people but with the Armenian people, too. According to a statement on foreign policy that appears on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, one of the chief foreign policy goals of the Republic is "resolving regional problems and creating an atmosphere of cooperation." Israel's ongoing efforts to push the United States into war with Iran obviously runs counter to that goal. But Israeli destabilization of the region is more dangerous than even that.

During a 24 June meeting of the U.N. Security Council, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the Arab League, stated that Israel's imminent official annexation of more land in the West Bank would inflame tensions and endanger peace across the Middle East, and could ignite "a religious war in and beyond our region." "If implemented," the Secretary-General warned, "Israeli annexation plans would not only be detrimental to the chances of peace today, but will destroy any prospects for peace in the future" (Los Angeles Times, 24 June 2020).

By appeasing Israel, the embassy decision will accelerate the destruction of large, well-established and previously prosperous Armenian communities in the region. In a recent interview, Vardan Voskanyan, head of the Yerevan State University Chair of Iranian Studies, understated the obvious: "Let me remind you that Armenia has also established relations with Arab countries, which, I do not think, are excited about the deepening of Armenian-Israeli relations" (Panorama.am, 10 June 2020).

The announcement of the embassy decision came in the same month that Syria's parliament, the

People's Council, unanimously recognized the Armenian genocide (on 13 February 2020), and it came right after the American President handed Syria's Golan Heights to Israel.

Armenian communities in Syria have flourished for generations—until the recent wars inflicted on Syria by the USA and its allies, including Turkey and Israel. The Armenian community in Jerusalem, by contrast, has been reduced to perhaps 500 members—a small fraction of its pre-1967 population. With the announcement of the decision to open an embassy in Tel Aviv, the Foreign Ministry of Armenia has betrayed the people of Syria—a people who, in our darkest days, gave far more than those who had far more to give.

Meanwhile, Israel still refuses to “recognize” the genocide. If recognition of the genocide by member-states of the United Nations is really a priority for Yerevan, then Yerevan has betrayed that goal, too.

Over the course of the past two decades, we have witnessed administrations in Yerevan stand by passively, while formerly thriving Armenian communities in the Middle East have been decimated. By joining the Coalition of the Willing, Yerevan actively participated in the destruction of the 30,000 member Armenian community in Iraq, and helped to set the stage for the destruction of the prosperous, thriving 130,000 member communities in Syria. Now, Armenians of Lebanon, already suffering from economic deprivation, have been feeling the consequences of Yerevan's embassy decision, which, in the minds of some Lebanese, has confirmed Ankara's caricature of Armenians as self-obsessed, ungrateful and duplicitous.

The Foreign Ministry of Armenia has claimed that a chief aim of the embassy decision is “protection of Armenia's interests in the region” (Jerusalem Post, 20 September 2019). After three decades of passively accepting the destruction of large Armenian communities in the Middle East, we are now supposed to believe that officials in Yerevan are suddenly seized with a desire to protect the interests of a community that their new Israeli “partners” have already reduced to a mere 500 members. Clearly, there are other considerations at work here. But the Foreign Ministry has not been forthcoming.

Yerevan's embassy decision will also have serious diplomatic fallout for Artsakh. On 21 April, Foreign Minister Mnatsakanyan repeated a long-standing claim, to the effect that “the principle of self-determination is a priority in Karabakh talks.” It would seem, then, that the Foreign Minister expects “the international community” to respect the principle of self-determination when it comes to 151,000 inhabitants of Artsakh, even as he appeases those who deny the right to self-determination to 13 million Palestinians. The embassy decision makes a mockery of the principle of self-determination, which is the core of the moral argument for Artsakh's independence from Azerbaijan.

The last point will not be lost on “the international community.” Yerevan's embassy decision will play out in the Islamic Conference, the Arab League, and other international forums. It will further isolate Nagorno Karabagh diplomatically, and it will further consolidate the consensus of “the international

community" in opposition to self-determination for Artsakh. These are foreseeable direct consequences of the decision to open an embassy in Tel Aviv.

To sum up: Yerevan's embassy decision has further destabilized Armenia's neighborhood, thereby compromising Armenia's security. It will further isolate the country diplomatically and economically, further endanger large Armenian communities in the Middle East, and deal a crippling blow to diplomacy relating to Artsakh. Those who care about Armenia, then, should demand that the decision be rescinded.

Armenia faces enormous challenges—economic, pandemic, demographic, diplomatic, and security. In the face of all of these problems--and in the face of escalating Israeli acts of aggression, annexation, and acts of war against Iran--the current administration in Yerevan has seen fit to alter Armenia's diplomatic position. And so far, officials in Yerevan have not provided anything in the way of a convincing explanation for a decision that will have serious long-term consequences for the people of Armenia whom those officials claim to represent.

The "Velvet Revolution" was supposed to have ushered in a new era of official transparency in Armenia. If it has done that, then the current administration in Yerevan owes the people of Armenia an honest and open explanation of the embassy decision.

Comments



Mesrob – 2020-08-04 10:15:12

I agree with Mr. Vanoyan. We boast that we have been around for millennia but conveniently forget that we were often vassals (even when we had kings) of Iran, Rome, Byzantium., and the Arabs. In addition to several disadvantages, we were often marred by our "nakharars" whose egotistical policies made Armenia even more vulnerable. Things haven't changed in 2020. Today's nakharars are the oligarchs who have ruled Armenia since independence. The situation hasn't changed because we are still a few, our country is small and we are landlocked. Finally, we are threatened from the east and the west. What should we do to retain Armenia? Become vassal of Russia. It beats disappearing. No other nation would go to war against Turkey to save us



Wahaken Vanoyan – 2020-08-03 01:47:49

My Dear friends, We Armenians are drowning in the turbulent waters of the Atlantic and we have no friends. Our little Armenia has no resources and our homeland is landlocked. We have not much to offer to big nations. With about three million population we have 40 plus political parties that are at each other's throat. Since our independence from Russia we have become more dependent on Russia. They are guarding our borders like the fox guarding the hen-house. What choice do we have? For the past several years we had very corrupt leaders who sold the cognac factory, telephone company, electrical power, privatized most of the land for their friends and family and many of the schools. Their action was no different than that of the Turks except killing. They chased a good chunk of the population out of the country, and they purchased mansions in Monte Carlo, Italy, Spain, U.S. and who knows where else. Today we finally have a decent prime minister who is trying very hard to put Humpty Dumpty together again. Let us stand with him; stop criticizing and stop arguing with each other. Our brothers and sisters, the remnants of our nation are fighting for our survival. Just remember, if Artsakh goes Armenia goes with it. If that happens then you will fight with your best friend that would be the one you see in the mirror. Vahaken Vanoyan Fresno CA USA



Armen Baghdoyan – 2020-08-02 02:27:23

An exhaustive, extremely powerful, and well deserved indictment of powers to be who are running Armenia today. Armenia has never faced such an unfathomable self-made existential predicament in all of its three thousand years. While the Malaysian parliament unanimously calls for the ouster of the pariah state of Israel from the United Nations for crimes against humanity, especially the native people of Palestine, neighboring Mideastern states and generally against the Whole Islamic world by repeatedly desecrating their holy mosque of al Aqsa in Jerusalem with utter disregard to elementary ethics and divinely ordained human rights, the Armenian government frivolously and unforgivably dismisses the vital interests of the Armenian people throughout the world, thus isolating itself from all peace-loving countries, including all the friends of Armenia, and the very Armenian people itself.



David – 2020-08-01 10:21:29

Excellent article.