"SPURK (DIASPORA) ALL-ARMENIAN FUND"

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> ***Prof. Dr. Yervant Kassouny, a well known Lebanese-Armenian historian, editor and an educator, has served his community in various capacities for more than fifty years. He has lectured at Haigazian University for several decades and chaired its Armenology department from 1978 to 1988. In the below passionately composed essay he poses existential questions and argues that there will not exist an "Armenia-centric Diaspora" without a "Diaspora- centric Diaspora". Dr. Kassouny proposes a "Pan-Diasporan Fund" to look after the dire needs of the Diaspora. Keghart.com readers are encouraged to comment on his proposal. Click on «Սփիւռք» - Համասփիւռքեան Հիմնադրամ to read the original Armenian text.--Editor.***

Yervant Kassouny, Beirut, 24 October 2015
Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian**, 12 December 2015

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"*Hayastan* (Armenia) All-Armenian Fund" was founded to meet the immediate needs of Armenia. It

had also a pan-national aim, to focus the attention of the Diaspora on Armenia. Does not the Diaspora have its own needs that require Diaspora-wide assistance? Is it not high time to have Diaspora focus its attention on Diaspora as well?

President Serzh Sarkissian presided over the "*Hayastan* All-Armenian Fund" and promoted the call for an "Armenia-centric Diaspora". The slogan was daring but ripe with unintended consequences. The president realized the unintended ill effects of the slogan and tried to smooth it out. The attempt was unsuccessful. The reality is that, willingly or unwillingly, the "Armenia-centric Diaspora" slogan nudges the Diaspora by the day to forego its own needs.

It should be noted that a "Diaspora centered Diaspora" is also Armenia-centered because a Diaspora that forgets to tend to its own needs will end up forgetting the needs of Armenia. Do we not realize that the Diaspora is on such a course? That is why in the rush hour melee of the time, it's important to take a back step and ask: Who am I? Why am I in Diaspora? Where do I come from and where am I headed? What are my goals? It is of vital national interest that each of us raises these questions and addresses them. It is also important to ask the following: In this era of globalization, do we have an all-inclusive cohesive national struggle, first for the Diaspora and then for Armenia?

In order to have a Diaspora centered on Diaspora, first and foremost we need to have an all-Diaspora summit. For more than half a century, many have written about the need for such a summit but unfortunately we still encounter impediments for its realization because of long-entrenched mentalities. If the surviving victims of the Genocide constitute the Diaspora and hence are the inheritors of that injustice, a Diaspora-wide representative summit is the only guarantor for the legitimacy for pursuing the restitution claims we have voiced all along.

We do not lack the manpower to organize such a summit. We have qualified people in the Diaspora who can structure the summit in the right way and further the pursuit of our demands with legitimate authority. It is high time we acted because the centennial of the Genocide puts the pursuit of our demands at the dawn of a new centennial. That is the reality we have to face with patience and be prepared to bear its cost. It's imperative that we envision another centennial along the path of our struggle for which we will need to have succeeding generations equipped to carry on our demands. Therein lies the crux of the matter.

If we expect that succeeding generations will assume the bitter ownership of our demands and the pursuit for recognition, restitution and reparation, then we need to educate these generations in an Armenian-centered education if we believe that an Armenian education is paramount for the preservation of national identity. Therefore the Armenian school should have to remain the focus of the Diaspora and the latter should be vigilant about its welfare--be it academic and finances. The Armenian school means students learning Armenian, teachers teaching Armenian culture and lecturers instructing Armenian heritage; Armenian principals and administration. What is the state of the Armenian schools? Suffice to say that day Armenian schools drag their day-to-day existence

under the sponsorship of churches and benevolent organizations, through the generous donations by the few and often by the donations of the concerned.

Why do Armenians schools close? Or why do we close them? It's no secret that a mercantile mentality prevails by the so-called financiers who, to address the gaps in the school budget, come with the ingenious proposal: "Let us close the school". Don't they realize that closing an Armenian school in the Diaspora is tantamount to closing a military garrison in Armenia? It is important to bear in mind this equitable comparison. It is not only in Lebanon and in Syria (especially nowadays) that the Armenian schools face financial crisis. Have we asked how do Armenian schools fare financially in Greece or in Istanbul? We ask ourselves in bewilderment as to why an Armenian school in United States closes down. In 2011 a six-million dollar endowment fund was created, one-million of which was donated from the educational fund of the AGBU. The fund is circled for the education of new priests. Most of the donors of the fund are from Middle Eastern communities but they did not have the courage to establish a similar fund to support Armenian schools in the Middle East. It is astonishing to read that Kirk Kerkorian donated $18 million towards the Andre Agassi (Aghasi) tennis school, while the American community could not convince Kerkorian to set up a $10 million endowment fund for Armenian schools. Let's also remember that Kerkorian donated $200 million to the California State University but the Armenian community could not secure a portion of his disbursement for Armenian educational institutions.

The Armenian Diaspora communities are retreating and withering away due to prevailing dire financial conditions and a failed leadership. Everything is with a let-us-get-by-today mentality. There are no strong financial institutions in the Diaspora because of lack of trust. It's the nature of the egocentric Armenian ethos. Should it happen that a collective Armenian undertaking starts bearing fruit, individual egos would take precedence to the detriment of the undertaking. The Armenian Diaspora is the slave of old methods and manners that exhaust people and lead to unproductively. Schools, churches, social, political and other organizations are all victims of these old methods and manners.

To overcome the inertia and implement a new way, it's important to have a think tank, a committee of experts. We have experts who can structure and propose such a plan, but in order to implement the proposals recommended by these experts we need to have a Diaspora endowment fund under the auspices of the leaders of the three Armenian denominations and which is managed by an independent expert executive body that is accountable to the Diaspora-wide representative body.

"*Spurk* (Diaspora) All-Armenian Fund" is not meant to be a substitute for the "*Hayastan* (Armenia) All-Armenian Fund". But it's fair to ask, during the last decade, discounting Russia, how much of the funds "*Hayastan* (Armenia) All-Armenian Fund" raised from Diaspora was used towards the needs of the Diaspora? Let us also be bold and transparent and reveal what portion of the funds "*Hayastan* (Armenia) All-Armenian Fund" raised during the last three years was used towards the needs of the Armenians in Syria?

Without discounting the needs in Armenia and Artsakh and always bearing in mind the need to help them as well, let's make these statements and raise the following questions:

- There is a need to renovate the schools in Armenia and Artsakh. Don't the Armenian schools in Diaspora have such needs?

- There are Armenians in dire economic conditions in Armenia and in Artsakh. Are there no such Armenians in the Diaspora?

- It is important to equip the hospitals in Armenia and in Artsakh with modern medical equipment to better serve patients. Do Diaspora infirmaries have no such needs as well?

- There is a need to assist people in Armenia and Artsakh to have patient care. Are there no Diaspora communities which need such assistance?

We dare to list just the following:

- The need to care the blind in Diaspora;

- Children who remain without schooling because their parents not only cannot afford their education but need them to work at an early age to help the family get by;

- Teachers who continue teaching while they are not paid for months on end;

- The budget crisis Armenian schools face that will eventually force them to shutter if the financial crisis is not resolved;

- The Armenian educator who recently passed away in Lebanon almost from starvation but no one cared enough to ask why.

When will this state of leaderless Diaspora end? "*Spurk* (Diaspora) All-Armenian Fund" is not a luxury. It's a long due necessity. The speeches not only have exhausted us but they are starving us as well. Don't we need to safeguard the honor of the Armenian in the Diaspora? We need to salvage the Diaspora. We need to awaken the self-awareness of the Diasporan morally and financially so as to help establish a strong financial machinery that will be able to address the needs of the Diaspora. Let us bear in mind that a strong and vibrant Armenia is conditioned by the presence of a strong and vibrant Diaspora.

Hence the components for a strong Diaspora: An all-Diaspora representative summit; a committee of experts; and "*Spurk* (Diaspora) All-Armenian Fund"

Let's repeat: If "*Hayastan* (Armenia) All-Armenian Fund" then firstly "*Spurk* (Diaspora) All-Armenian Fund"