SYRIAN-ARMENIAN EXIT STRATEGY

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Ted Tourian LLM, Sacramento, 25 November 2012

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I Necessity for an Exit Strategy for Syrian-Armenians

Currently, there are at least 60,000 ethnic Armenians living in Syria. For the most part, Armenians have stayed neutral to the sectarian violence engulfing Syria. The ability of the Armenians to defend themselves in Syria is not feasible. Currently, the only real fighting force defending Armenians are Armenians themselves; merchants, who have been given munitions by a retreating Syrian Army.

Contrasting the civilian Armenian population defending themselves is the "Free Syrian Army" (FSA). The FSA is largely composed of foreign fighters, coming from places like Afghanistan, Chechnya, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. These fighters are trained in Turkey. These countries have continually engaged in some form of anti-Armenianism, and it would be naïve to think that if given the chance, soldiers from these countries would abstain from a policy of exterminating Armenians.

In recent weeks, the FSA has directed its ire towards Armenians. For instance, the FSA targeted and

destroyed St. Gevorg church in Aleppo's Armenian-populated district of Nor Kyugh. Armenians are targeted by the FSA for their historical allegiance to the Assad regime:

> Nine Christian men, including seven ethnic Armenians, were ordered off the bus while the gunmen checked IDs, according to Mark, who was mistaken as the driver's assistant and spared interrogation.
>
> **"Get off. You're with Bashar too," they told a Kurdish man who tried to intervene, referring to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad**. (Emphasis added.)

The former Armenian ambassador to Lebanon, Arman Navasardyan, has already warned that if Bashar al-Assad's regime falls, Armenians in Syria face a "St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre" if they are not evacuated. These recent events bring Navasardyan's prediction much closer to fruition.

II Implementation of an Exit Strategy

The implementation of an exit strategy is complicated. The following section discusses the necessary steps that must be considered in order to implement a successful exit strategy for Armenians in Syria: a) convincing Armenians in and out of Syria that leaving Syria is necessary; b) procedural considerations concerning potential new destinations for Armenian refugees; c) sustaining Armenian refugees outside Syria; and d) protecting the unique culture of Syrian Armenians. Ultimately, executing a successful exit strategy is more art than science.

a. **Convincing Armenians In and Out of Syria that Leaving Syria is Necessary:**

A successful exit strategy is as much dependant on the will of those fleeing. It is absolutely necessary to get Armenians in Syria to recognize the importance of leaving Syria, even if it means leaving behind homes, businesses, or a life that cannot be replicated anywhere else. Convincing any potential refugee to flee requires the upmost sensitivity especially when that potential refugee may be blinded by the aforementioned attachments.

This is the current dilemma facing Armenians in Syria today: *would we rather die in Syria, or move somewhere else?* Convincing a person to leave a home, a business that their grandparents started after the genocide is not easy, but necessary in order to avoid a worse fate that waits for any minority if Bashar al-Assad's government is toppled.

Equally difficult is convincing outside Armenian institutions that the time has come for Armenians in Syria to leave. For instance, would the Republic of Armenia welcome mass migration of one of the strongest Armenian Diaspora's? Mass migration of the Armenian Syrian Diaspora weakens the Republic of Armenia's potential relations with Syria both during and at the conclusion of the war. Are traditional organizations like the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) or the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) in favor of evacuating Armenians in Syria when such organizations have substantial properties in Syria? Who better to be caretakers of

its properties than Armenians armed with a slingshot, refusing to leave Syria, while an FSA-like Goliath trained by professional Turkish forces bears down?

Decisions to let go of the material are difficult. Individuals leaving everything behind, and the institutions tasked with serving the Armenian nation, must ask what Ruskin asks "ow, as he was sinking, had he the gold? Or had the gold him?"

a. **Procedural Considerations Concerning Potential New Destinations for Armenian Refugees:**

Discussion has already been made of where potential Armenian refugees should move: Akhalkalaki; Armenia; Cyprus; Lebanon; the Republic of Nagarno-Karbagh; and the west. Each destination offers its own positives and negatives.

In order for a successful exit strategy to take place, procedural considerations need to be adhered to. This includes securing visa and passport requirements. Recently, the Republic of Armenia has eased visa and passport requirements for Armenians fleeing sectarian violence in Syria, and neighboring countries. However, entry requirements with respect to other countries have not been simplified. For instance, an Armenian refugee leaving for Cyprus does not need a passport provided they have the necessary documents issued to stateless persons and recognized refugees. How does a Syrian-Armenian refugee become recognized as a refugee in Cyprus? These procedural obstacles can be a nightmare, especially for Syrian-Armenians facing sectarian violence, or Armenian Diaspora organizations ill-equiped to deal with legalese, and are looking to help evacuate Syrian-Armenians.

Fortunately, potential Armenian refugees and Armenian Diaspora organizations trying to mobilize can rely on the Armenian Bar Association (ABA). The ABA recently wrote a letter to United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, advocating the plight of Armenians in Syria. In describing itself as “the largest organized group of Armenian Diasporan attorneys, judges and law students in the world,” and showing continued concern for the plight of Armenians in Syria, Armenian organizations should not hesitate to contact the ABA and request *pro bono* assistance with respect to any potential legal barriers that exist in evacuating Armenians facing sectarian strife.

a. **Sustaining Armenian Refugees Outside Syria:**

The next question is sustaining Armenian refugees outside Syria. The Armenian government has already taken several positive steps forward. For instance, the Armenian government has recently exempted taxation of Armenians fleeing Syria, and offered to provide Armenians fleeing Syria with apartments and jobs. This is in stark contrast to help Armenia was initially providing, where Armenians fleeing Syria “coincidentally” saw a 20 percent increase in housing prices when seeking refuge in Armenia.

However, labor mobility will become the biggest difficulty. For instance, some reports state that

there are 10,000 Armenian jewelers potentially leaving Syria. Armenia, already a country known for jewelers, recently saw a 60 percent drop of sales in diamond polishing. Realistically speaking, Armenia cannot afford more jewelers flooding its already declining market.

If Armenians fleeing Syria repatriate to Akhalkalaki, Armenia, or the Republic of Nagarno-Karabagh, questions needing to be addressed are what skill sets do these refugees possess that can make them useful members of their new society? Can their skills be transferred to their potential new homes? Are there options to train refugee Armenians with a new skill-set to make them valuable to their potential new homes?

Most Armenian Diaspora organizations have allocated resources on the presumption that Armenians in Syria must remain in Syria. A quick search of aid efforts reveals that all help received by Syrian-Armenians is designed to ensure that the Armenian population in Syria remains in Syria: the Armenian Relief Society (ARS) has focused its charitable donations to cover the tuitions of students in order to alleviate the financial burden to be faced by parents and, at the same time, to fund schools; AGBU has provided relief with food, medicine, shelter, water and energy to thousands of Armenian families in various cities, with local youth from our Chapters mobilizing as volunteers; the Syrian Armenian Relief Fund's assistance will be used for food, medicine, temporary shelter, emergency medical and other critical humanitarian expenses by the united committees established by the Syrian-Armenian communities in accordance with local needs.

All aid is important concerning the plight of Syrian-Armenians. It cannot be stressed enough that this article is not intended to slight in any way, any group helping Syrian-Armenians. What this article hopefully tries to do is state that allocating resources to ensure Armenians stay in Syria is not efficient. As discussed above, if Bashar al-Assad's regime falls, there is a very strong possibility ethnic Armenians will be subject to the worst pogroms since Sumgait. The result will be that aid initially assigned for the purposes of ensuring the Armenian population remains in Syria will have gone to waste. Only the Armenian government will have tried to hedge its bets by trying to accommodate Syrian-Armenian refugees.

a. **Protection of the Unique Culture of Syrian Armenians:**

Syrian-Armenian culture is steeped in history and tradition. Kesab has been an Armenian center, shielding Armenians from Ottoman Turk persecutions. Aleppo has been a historic Armenian Diaspora city, with many middle class Armenians. The Syrian-Armenian community "has been a crucible that has forged many great leaders for the diaspora." Any potential recommended migrations must take into account the uniqueness of the Armenians living in Syria. The following section provides examples of locations and considerations that need to be taken into account

Akhalkalaki and the Republic of Nagarno-Karbagh are suitable for Armenians in Syria who come from villages like Yacoubiyah or Kesab. Armenians from larger cities like Damascus or Aleppo could be absorbed in Yerevan. However, relying only on Yerevan would be detrimental. With respect to

Syrian Armenians en masse fleeing to Armenia, ARF Bureau representative Hrant Markarian said it best that Armenia may not be able to fully absorb all Syrian Armenian migrants: "Let's be fair and recognize that unfortunately our country is not the sort of country that can handle a large number of refugees."

Relocation is also possible to other near-east countries such as Cyprus. Cyprus already has some infrastructure ready to help absorb fleeing Armenians, such as the currently unused Melkonian Educational Institute. However, full absorption of Armenian refugees to Cyprus may not be feasible due to the relatively higher value of the Euro as compared to the Syrian pound, which might further erode the living standards of Syrian-Armenian refugees. Furthermore, migration of Syrian-Armenians to western countries comes with the risk of "white genocide."

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumgait_pogrom

http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2012/08/19/233028.html

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9539244/Syria-Christians-take-up-arms-for-first-time.html

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPPtwc6CdLw

http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2012/09/25/who-are-the-syrian-rebels/

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19124810

For instance, Afghanistani Mujahadeen and Chechen fighters were enlisted to fight ethnic Armenians in the Republic of Nagarno Karabagh, and its quest for self-determination (http://www.azad-hye.net/article/article_view.asp?re=985ghs92; Yossef Bodansky (2008). Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror (reprint ed.). HarperCollins. p. 36. ISBN 0-06-142977-5. Retrieved 14 August 2011.); Pakistan is the only country in the world that does not recognize Armenia's independence in protest over the Republic of Nagarno Karabagh's victory of self-determination (http://www.today.az/news/politics/30102.html); Saudi Arabia and Armenia do not have diplomatic relations (http://www.mfa.am/en/country-by-country/sa/); It is historical fact that the Ottoman Empire (precursor to the Republic of Turkey) committed genocide against Armenians (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_Genocide).

http://www.aina.org/news/20121103174722.htm

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Nov-02/193661-extortion-sectarianism-rife-in-lawless-northern-syria.ashx#ixzz2BI2T3jSD

(The Daily Star :: Lebanon News :: http://www.dailystar.com.lb)

http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/126464/

It should be kept in mind that this analysis is a blue-print, and subject to change should the situation demand it.

http://armenpress.am/eng/news/697326/the-majority-of-the-syrian-armenians-do-not-want-to-leave-syria.html

http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-plight-of-syrias-christians-we-left-homs-because-they-were-trying-to-kill-us-8274710.html

http://hetq.am/eng/news/20196/president-sargsyan-we-are-not-urging-our-brothers-to-leave-syria.html

http://www.tert.am/en/news/2012/07/21/siria-haj/

David does not always beat Goliath.

http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65669

http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=429908

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Jun-27/178400-cyprus-says-ready-to-evacuate-refugees-from-syria.ashx (Cyprus says it's ready to evacuate refugees from Syria; not just Armenians.)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18929940 (Syrians en masse leaving for Lebanon; not just Armenians.)

http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65757

For instance, Canada pushing Syrians who have family in Canada to immigrate to Canada (http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/a-team-canada-plan-for-syria/article4701907/); Switzerland is accepting Syrian refugees (http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/Swiss_consider_accepting_Syrian_refugees.html?cid=32282134); pressure being put on the European Union to accept more Syrian refugees (http://www.neurope.eu/article/humanitarian-organizations-call-eu-protect-syrian-refugees); Canada pushing Syrians who have family in Canada to immigrate to Canada (http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/a-team-canada-plan-for-syria/article4701907/);

http://www.mirrorspectator.com/2012/08/15/visa-passport-requirements-eased-for-syrian-armenians/

http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2006.nsf/0/BCD9E71A8FBBA8DCC225720B001D9AFE?OpenDocument

http://hetq.am/eng/news/18687/armenian-bar-association-urges-un-secretary-general-to-prote

ct-syrian-armenians.html

http://www.armenianbar.com/news/show/233/1

Refusing to provide *pro bono* assistance in such circumstances would be tantamount to making the ABA's letter to the UN Secretary General meaningless.

http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/22069/

http://armenpress.am/eng/news/698048/issues-on-providing-syrian-armenian-with-apartments-and-jobs-have-been-discussed.html

http://www.rferl.org/content/syria-armenia-housing-market/24685725.html

http://news.am/eng/news/126555.html

http://www.israelidiamond.co.il/english/News.aspx?boneId=918&objid=12020

http://ars1910.org/?p=2155

http://agbu.org/syriarelief/index.html

http://www.syrianarmenianrelieffund.org/about.php

It should be noted that Armenian charitable organizations making the decision to allocate resources on the presumption that Armenians in Syria remain in Syria was probably made before the FSA began directing operations against Armenians.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYoCbAmOBzw

http://www.armenianweekly.com/2012/10/11/chicago-holds-rally-in-support-of-syrian-armenians/

http://www.armenianweekly.com/2012/07/27/the-syrian-armenian-dilemma-community-preservation-or-out-migration/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Genocide#cite_note-0