THANK YOU, SYRIA

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Editorial, 19 April 2010

In the six or seven decades following the Genocide of Armenians, Deir el-Zor, a town in eastern Syria was just a name in dusty books, in Armenian newspapers, in the imagination and nightmares of Armenians everywhere. With the heightened awareness of the Genocide in recent years and the ease of travel, the unknown Calvary of Armenians has become a pilgrimage destination for Diaspora Armenians, in particular. To visit the wind-swept Armenian chapel in Markaddeh--in the desert east of Deir el-Zor, to walk on the adjacent grey hill and to scratch with their bare fingers the fragile bones of our martyrs from the hillside, and to touch with reverence and sorrow those eloquent relics has become a ritual for many Armenians.

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A parallel—but unfortunate for Armenians--development to the above phenomenon has been the rapprochement between Syria and Turkey. In recent years we have watched Turkey flex its muscles, proclaim itself a regional superpower, claim it's a bridge between the West and the East, between Christian Europe and the Moslem world. It has even slithered itself between Syria and Israel, boasting that it's acting as a peacemaker between those two enemies.
The rapprochement between Syria and Turkey is the result of an uneven relationship. It's a forced friendship: Turkey is militarily much stronger than Syria; Turkey has reduced the flow of Euphrates waters into parched Syria, and —before the rapprochement—had threatened to tighten the Euphrates spigot even more by building up-river dams.

Although there have been no media reports, it's reasonable to assume that Turkish diplomats have informed Syrian diplomats that Ankara is not happy with the increased popularity of the hill of bones near Deir el-Zor. Even in the unlikely case Turkey has not expressed its displeasure that Syria has not discouraged the increased pilgrimage, Damascus certainly realizes that its stronger neigbour and threatening "friend" is displeased with the high profile Deir el-Zor has developed, thus underlining the reality of the Genocide of Armenians. That silent hill in the desert mocks all the Turkish propaganda, and all the millions of dollars Ankara has wasted to deny the Genocide of Armenians.

The most recent pilgrim to Deir el-Zor and to Markaddeh was Serzh Sargsyan, president of Armenia, who visited our mass funeral pyre in late March. "We… do not accept the style of references to the Armenian Turkish dialogue in attempts to avoid recognition of the Genocide," said Sargsyan during his trip. "I am here to commemorate and to pray for the vast majority of my slaughtered nation that had suffered both physical and cultural extermination…" continued the president of Armenia. When he said that Auschwitz is the Deir el-Zor of the Jews and then wondered "where and when will be held our Nuremberg?" Sargsyan knew that Deir el-Zor has materialized into a lightning rod of the Armenian campaign to persuade the world—and Turkey—to acknowledge what Turkey did in 1915 was genocide, pure and simple.

During the Genocide Syria became a sanctuary for countless Armenian survivors—young and old. In the subsequent nine decades the country has continued to be a hospitable land for Armenians. Armenians have not only survived, but have prospered in welcoming Syria. For that and for not being intimidated by big bad Turkey, we owe a huge "THANK YOU" to the Syrian government and to the Syrian people—true and brave friends of Armenians.