

THE BOUNDARIES OF TRUE INDEPENDENCE

Posted on October 29, 2010 by Keghart



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By Tatul Sonentz-Papazian, Watertown MA, 29 October 2010



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I put "national" in quotation marks, because more often than not, those interests prefer to ignore the legitimacy of historically national and cultural realities which, unfortunately, on today's colorful maps and globes, seldom coincide with transnational political and economic interests, oblivious to concepts of ethnicity, diversity of civilizations and cultures. Black Africa, Kurdistan and Armenia are but three obvious examples of this fact. In terms of semantics, by "relieving" the term "nation" from its traditional ethnic and cultural "burden", the heirs to yesterday's imperial and colonial interests have managed to replace culture-based national rights with the power of eminent domain granted to sovereign states over arbitrarily delineated "national" territories that they occupy by virtue of treaties of convenience and agreements of mutual accommodation "legitimized" by force of arms. Having lost its independence, conquered, colonized, and decimated by various imperial powers over the past six centuries, as a historically distinct cultural and national entity on the threshold of a new era, Armenia is gradually regaining its independence through the *de jure* recognition of its sovereignty over a small portion of its historical territories and the armed resistance and struggle in Artsakh, that has so far resulted in a tacit -- and as yet tenuous -- *de facto* acceptance of the reality of the Republic of Mountainous Karabagh. The struggle is far from over. As a matter of fact, by putting the Sevres Treaty and Wilsonian Armenia on the political back burner over the last few years, the Armenians have embarked on a clear diplomatic retreat from the entrenched commitment of the 1970's and '80's to a viable Armenian National State, within boundaries that could make true independence plausible.

On May 28, 1918, barely surviving a particularly barbaric attempt of genocide and imminent annihilation by mounting a heroic last ditch stand against the superior military might of a determined

and merciless enemy, jostled by world events totally beyond its control, the Armenian people, through its leadership of the day convening in the capital city of a neighboring state, declared independence, claiming sovereignty over "Armenian-inhabited provinces" of the region. Basically, the Armenians were declaring national sovereignty relying on their long history of continuous presence geographically and culturally linked with a region that throughout recorded history has been recognized by the civilized world as the Armenian Plateau. The modern day resurgence of Armenia is not the emergence of a new "nation" --as modern Western historiography would have it - - but the liberation and re-emergence of an ancient and singularly unique nation with deep roots in the political and cultural history of the human race. A nation with a firm and long- established identity, that is regaining its recognition and sovereignty over a small parcel of its ancestral patrimony as a modern day nation-state, trying to re-unite its decimated and scattered people within reasonable boundaries, as yet compromised and undetermined due to centuries of colonialist encroachments and misrule punctuated by periodic attempts of genocidal bloodletting and deportation.

These were the dire conditions that dictated the careful tone and precise wording of the 1918 declaration of independence. The handful of soldiers, intellectuals and statesmen who -- as members of government were saddled with the impossible task of bringing order to a hopelessly chaotic situation -- were aware of the historic significance of their duties; they had neither the time nor the inclination for partisan politics or messianic ego trips. They realized that the emerging Republic was more, much more than an amalgam of parliament, ministries and departments, a mere creature of international treaties, politics and diplomacy. These much criticized, and often maligned, champions and pioneers of Armenian self rule and freedom sensed the importance of the infant Republic's function not only as an independent state, but as a beacon of unity and common purpose and parenthood, projecting its as yet only glimmering light to every corner of the earth where scattered Armenian communities were thirsting for a gleam of hope, a chance to become part of a renascent national entity, to share in its struggle for survival and growth, to help it grow and reach the boundaries of true independence.

Eighty-two years later, in spite of the enormous advantages of international recognition and full membership in the United Nations Organization, the present government of the Third Armenian Republic, determined at all costs to remain at the helm, in all appearances, has lost its bearings in the absence of a truly national domestic and foreign policy course, reacting in unpredictable moves to whatever current it encounters on a thus far unknown destination. The present leadership has drifted so far away from the harbors of basic Armenian national interests that the guiding light of the historic May 28, 1919 beacon of national unity, the proclamation of United Armenia, no longer reaches it. In addition to this tragic reality, Armenia's ship of state, due to mismanagement and social neglect, seems to be headed uncharted into a severe storm in the dark and threatening waters of regional conflicts and geo-political confrontations.

It seems as though the long years of past oppression and present self abuse have resulted in paralyzing complexes inhibiting our national will and sense of direction and purpose. The almost continuous attacks on our nation's physical and spiritual makeup by foreign powers striving for hegemony on the Armenian Plateau, seem to have robbed us of the ability to maintain a vision of a very real and viable presence deeply rooted in the past, holding its own in the present and looking at the future with faith, hope and a commitment to a free and independent existence as a nation deserving of the same rights as other nations of this world.

Deprived of that vision, and craving for personal freedom, thousands upon thousands, abandoned -- and continue to abandon -- their patrimony seeking the illusive dignity of a "free" existence on foreign shores, rendering the homeland even more vulnerable to foreign demographic and political aggression. Needless to say, this separation from their roots has robbed these emigrants of the dignity of their true identity inherited from a culture that took shape over millenia, as natural and real as the lofty mountains that witnessed and nurtured its birth and progress over countless centuries of struggle and achievement. The progeny of these uprooted multitudes face the consequences of the inevitable crisis of identity in a world more and more conscious of the diversity of competing civilizations, of ethnic roots and cultural and religious belonging.

One of the phenomena of this sad state of affairs, is the behavioral pattern prompted by the "millet" syndrome, common to most people who for long periods of time find themselves deprived of political power as a collective. A deep-rooted feeling of almost total dependency on foreign powers for guidance and governance, accompanied by feelings of contempt for indigenous political leadership. "Cultural autonomy" seems to be the limit beyond which the members of a "millet" are seldom willing to venture. We don't need to go into detail, since examples of this type of behavior on the part of individuals as well as organized groups are plentiful, from any corner of the diaspora to -- alas -- Armenia itself. If this type of thinking had prevailed, it is safe to say, that the Republic of Mountainous Karabagh, Armenian Artsakh, would have remained only an impossible dream.

The venal crusade against the traditional Armenian political parties and their leadership that marked the process of the transition to independence from a discredited and bankrupt Soviet system, is but another facet of the "millet" syndrome, that prevents its Armenian victims from believing, that the Armenian nation, like most modern nations adhering to the concept of a free and democratic society, can -- and should -- have its own political parties with a diversity of opposing views on social and political issues, if a closed society with an oppressive government is to be avoided. Riddled with feelings of inferiority and political impotence, the members of a "millet", whose leaders have often managed to secure a prosperous existence for themselves catering to the values and interests of their foreign mentors, cannot bring themselves to believe that Armenians, as most civilized people, can argue without hating, can compete without cheating, can criticize and castigate the overt and covert policies of their government without the fear of being unjustly labeled as traitors by members of an establishment who, time and again, have put personal gain above national

interests. The kind of faith and confidence in their people, that is needed to grasp the true meaning of a free and intellectually pluralistic society, seems to be totally out of their reach.

As a consequence, the moral and physical foundations of our newly emancipated nation have become shaky. In these critical times, the various constituents of the Armenian people were expected to mount a solid, united stand against the onslaught of enemy interests. Instead, we are witnessing the reappearance of old antagonisms based on geographic, denominational, cultural and ideological intolerance against which the best minds of our 19th and 20th century national reawakening had so diligently fought, struggling to promote the concept of a nation secure in its identity, rich and strong in its diversity, unafraid of dissent. They almost succeeded, when out of chaos and misery, they laid the foundations of a homeland, the boundaries of which were to be determined, above all, by the spiritual and physical resources of a nation struggling for total emancipation and integration. Contrary to the views of those who constantly trumpet their oddly simplistic versions of "unity", the danger does not lie in the clash of ideas, or in the diversity that over the centuries has been the hallmark of our nation -- as it is in the case of most great nations -- but in the tendentious and destructive trend of presenting that diversity as a danger and using it as a political weapon to intimidate and control a nation in the throes of a desperate, yet heroic, struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds.

We should bear in mind, that the basic guarantee of our true independence within secure boundaries stems not merely from international treaties and agreements that are acceptable to one and all, but first and foremost, from our own self-image as a nation, deeply rooted in history and forever tied to the reality of our patrimony. Without that confident self assessment, without shedding the confining limitations of a "millet" mindset, our nation will never reach the secure boundaries of true independence.

