THIRTY YEARS LATER

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By Dikran Abrahamian BA, MD, Ontario, 29 August 2009

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Dedicated to the exceptional scholars of WATS who made it possible to get to this stage

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The opening statement of the final resolution of the Congress talked about the "question of existence". It said, "Throughout our history, the Armenian existence has not been threatened as much as today. For centuries living on its ancestral lands, often under foreign yoke, being persecuted and massacred, it was able to preserve its existence … without a particular or planned effort. However, the present is different."
To secure the ongoing existence of the Diaspora, the Congress stressed the need for a "centralized" entity to represent all Armenians and co-ordinate all efforts. To this end, the resolution called for organizing "a committee of specialists" who would be instructed to prepare a "constitution".

Thirty years later, the intent of this brief note is not to pass judgment on what the Congress achieved, and the remarks are not politically motivated.

Probably the slogan "hayabahbanoum" (preserving Armenianness) was so prevalent at the time that it defined the mindset of the whole assembly itself. As such, one wonders whether it did accomplish much beyond highlighting the obvious. Despite the efforts of the organizers to shed the ghetto mentality, the final resolution called only for actions within the community without reaching out to the outside world. It saw itself only in the mirror, rather than looking out through a window.

Although the participants stressed the importance of the "occupied" Western Armenian lands as "the base" for people "to continue to survive", and considered the Diaspora as the "lawful owner" of those lands, there was no mention at all to recover them.

Today, it appears that they were either not aware of - which is unlikely - or simply ignored other fermentations. It was during the same period that young people turned to violence. It was probably an unorthodox method that they chose, but they eventually achieved what the Congress did not: getting the attention of the world community about the plight of the Armenians and opening the envelope of the Genocide.

Speaking of the Genocide, the resolution made no mention of it either in its technical form or in some other words. That is surprising. Presumably, it was in the minds of the participants, but it was not spelled out. Almost fifteen years earlier, the 50th Anniversary of the Genocide was commemorated with robust expressions at least in Beirut and particularly in Armenia. There, for the first time, the words "Hoghere, hoghere" (the lands, the lands) were shouted in the streets of Yerevan. It is simply impossible that the participants of the Congress had no knowledge of those momentous events in the history of the Diaspora.

For as long as one remembers, calls for unity have been pervasive. The Congress was not an exception. Here we are, thirty years later with no apparent unity. Did the sky fall down? Did the Armenians in the Diaspora perish? Of course, the answer varies from person to person, organization to organisation, and place to place. Yes, some communities shrunk, and others almost were lost or are on the verge of being lost. Yet, new communities flourished, with exceptional vigor and determination, more democratic and decentralized, or rather multicentric.

Granted, there is the possibility of having a generation that will cease to use its mother tongue. A not so dissimilar generation, however, produced stellar scholars. They, along their colleagues from the international community drive the political agenda today. To their credit, they have accomplished a monumental task without politicizing existential matters and the recognition of the Armenian rights.

The upcoming conference organized by Haigazian University and the ANC-Middle East is viewed within above historical context. Thirty years divide us from the First Armenian Congress. It is simply uplifting to see academic gatherings that dot the map from Istanbul to Yerevan, USA, Europe and beyond, dedicated to the Armenian Genocide. The scope of the discussion has expanded. It is no longer a matter of recognition.

For sometime now, International law in relation to the Genocide of the Armenians has attracted attention. It is not exclusively a scholarly exercise. Politicians, lawyers, publishers and non-affiliated individual activists have discussed or taken preliminary steps in tackling the matter. For example, a workshop entitled ***Turkish Genocide-denial strategy and counter strategies*** held in Montreal in March 2007, included a session which was almost exclusively devoted to legal issues. The moderator was attorney Harry Dikranian. The works of some of the participants of the conference at

the Haigazian University were under study, specifically those of Dr. William Schabas and Dr. Alfred De Zayas. Another example is the legal case of a scholar. It may set a special precedent with both local Turkish and international repercussions.

The significance of pursuing legal means to attain certain objectives in the struggle for recognition and a just resolution becomes evident when the geopolitical concerns of the present time are factored in. The world is not going to change anytime soon. Globalization, a "friendlier" ringing word for imperialism, has its long-term agenda and so far is proceeding at full steam. This process is counter to the aspirations of the Armenians and many other people around the globe. It has nothing substantial to offer except some perishable goodies. Under the prevailing circumstances, along with agitation for the recognition of the Genocide by new jurisdictions, the path forward should necessarily include the courts.

Understandably, at each new juncture, "what if" questions abound. Won't legal attempts fail?

Isn't the ruling of the Ninth Circuit Court a lesson of how treacherous the legal battle can be, and how unjustly the decisions are arrived at? The answer for the moment is yes. Nevertheless, a setback of this nature has only local implications and cannot be extrapolated in kind or across expanses. It is more important to tabulate and analyze the cases in Turkey itself. That undertaking will provide clues to formulate future strategies.

Expansion of recognition of the Genocide by new countries and parliaments, prosecuting deniers of the Genocide of the Armenians in Europe, the French bill, the failure of the attempts to silence boards of education in Ontario and Massachusetts, some cases not resolved to the satisfaction of prosecutors in Turkey are all heartening. They are the harbingers of a new trend, and the international courts may follow suit.

Doubting may be healthy, but confidence in justice, perseverance, and hard work will ultimately prevail.

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