

WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Posted on October 19, 2014 by Keghart



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By Arpiar Petrossian, Tehran, 20 October 2014

Since I was very young I remember our elders complaining of the indifference of western society towards the Armenian Genocide. We admitted that their media reported it and their relief activities were helpful but we always pointed out that, compared to the magnitude of the crime, they were too little and not official. In short, we claimed that the world had done near nothing for us--and we were right.



Yazidi refugees trapped on Sinjar mountain - August 2014

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I always had this annoying feeling: why don't we, as veteran victims of this crime, show any reaction to others' suffering?

There was a long list of answers: we didn't have an independent state; our communities in the Diaspora were not all that well organized (they were disunited and quite polarized); we had so many inter-community and intra-community problems that we had no time to think of others, especially people who had hardly heard of Armenians.

Well, it's very different now: we have a 23-year- old, established and (at least nominally) sovereign homeland. The Diaspora is reasonably well-organized. We have (relatively) little infighting. We have had--and have--quite a few influential personalities. We have assumed the status of a viable nation on the international scene.

Then along comes ISIL/ISIS/IS/Caliphate and starts slaughtering all the "infidels" it can lay its hands on, including the Iraqi and Syrian Yezidis, whose relatives are the major ethnic minority in Armenia. Surely, the Armenian state--and by extension every Armenian--has an obligation to them.

Armenia has voiced its concern and has sent \$100,000 for relief organization. In the absence of precise information, we can assume that out of more than half-a-million Yezidis, at least about 200,000 are actual or potential refugees. That makes it 50 cents per refugee!

IT IS A DISGRACE!

Deputy Speaker of Armenian Parliament Edward Sharmazanov stated that a bank account had been established to help the Yezidis of Iraq, and called on his colleagues in parliament to donate. The Republic of Mountainous Karabagh announced it would take in Yezidi refugees but Armenia did not follow suit. And that is about all that could be found in the news! Yes, Armenian authorities said that they were concerned in the welfare of the Yezidis and there are ongoing contacts with the Yezidis in Armenia, but no progress in relief has been reported. They also said that only 200 Yezidis have expressed a wish to relocate in Armenia. Let's believe that. Have any of them been taken in?

And then there is the Assyrian/Chaldean community: another minority whose relatives in Syria and Iraq face similar fate as the Yezidis.

Let's face it, we have been indifferent.

What can we do?

To begin with, Armenia can take in a number of refugees. Transport permits, especially for flights, can be negotiated and obtained from Iran, over which the trip should take place (since Iraq has no borders with Armenia). Transportation can be arranged by the Armenian government and/or Armenian travel agencies in the Diaspora, financed by donations and government subsidy. The Yezidis and the Assyrians in Armenia will, no doubt, help refugees adapt to their new environment.

An ad hoc committee of state appointees and volunteers can take charge, collect donations many times more than the meager \$100,000, arrange temporary lodging for the refugees, provide their primary needs and maintain contact with Yezidi and Assyrian organizations in Armenia and the Armenian community in Erbil, Iraq.

The Armenian lobby in the Diaspora can stand by them and persuade the authorities in the countries where they reside to help the refugees.

As the first victims of genocide in the 20th century, we--more than most people--know what the Yezidis, Assyrians, and the Chaldeans are going through. As well, many Armenians were rescued by these three groups during the Genocide. For these and for obvious compassionate reasons, Armenians should be at the forefront of people extending a hand to the victims of the current genocide perpetrated by ISIL/ISIS.

