

SKEWED PRIORITIES AND ALEPPO ARMENIANS

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Sarkis Yaralian, Kuwait, 22 June 2015

No explanation is required to assert that the Republic of Armenia (RoA) should protect the Armenian Diaspora in addition to looking after the interests of its citizens. But what is happening to Aleppo Armenians is characteristic of how the Armenian leadership--inside and outside of the RoA--think and behave when it comes to national critical and existential issues.

For months Aleppo has been largely surrounded by Syrian opposition militants. Transportation to and from Aleppo has been confined to a secondary road secured by the Assad regime forces. Frequent power and water disruptions, the shortage and high cost of food have all contributed to the misery of Aleppo residents. Despite the siege, an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Armenians have remained in Syria's largest city risking their lives in an increasingly brutal civil war which is being fueled by outside forces, particularly Turkey.

Indications are that the city will soon be occupied by Syrian opposition forces and Islamic fundamentalists. Government troops have been retreating from their positions in northwestern, southern and eastern Syria. Whether these are tactical moves or genuine withdrawal and consolidation of positions is secondary to the threat of Islamic movements to major Syrian cities such as Homs, Latakia and specifically Aleppo.

What has the RoA or Diaspora leadership done to ensure the safety and security of their compatriots in Aleppo? The Armenian government has hosted several thousand Aleppo Armenians in Yerevan and in other regions. Aleppo Armenians who have settled in Armenia have done so at their own expense and initiative. They now face the challenge of making a living in Armenia or immigrating to Europe and North America. The most pressing issues--such as employment and housing--have not been resolved. With the exception of meager assistance by the ministry of diaspora for job-searching Syrian-Armenians, there has been no tangible support to enable the immigrants settle in Armenia permanently. Some have tried to start small businesses (mainly in retail food, car repair and light manufacturing). There have been expressions by the RoA government and in parliament to settle the refugees in Artsakh. But the fact is the Syrian-Armenians are mainly from Aleppo. They are urbanites not equipped to manage harsh rural conditions in remote areas.

Armenians of Aleppo, surrounded by hostile Islamist groups, remain under imminent threat of an all-out attack at any moment. Some have stayed put because of lack of housing prospects in neighboring Lebanon or in Armenia. The minister of diaspora and other officials have said Armenia has no means to initiate the mass evacuation of Armenians from Aleppo. However, the government will help people who settle in Armenia. In other words, Syrian-Armenians must arrange their evacuation at their expense. Once they settle in Yerevan they can seek "assistance" from the authorities.

The above methodology and mindset is not acceptable to the Syrian-Armenians (even to those who

have the financial means). Thus the government of Armenia has missed an opportunity to regroup and gather some of the Diaspora Armenians within borders of the RoA. It has also missed the opportunity to accomplish the paramount objective: provide safety, security, and the chance for peaceful life to compatriots.

By not initiating mass evacuation and mass immigration of the Syrian-Armenians, the RoA has missed the chance to diversify and strengthen its demography and infuse new blood (Syrian-Armenians are well known for their work ethic) to its workforce and economy. Previous RoA governments failed to embrace and integrate more than 200,000 Armenian refugees from Baku and other regions of Azerbaijan during the '90s. The result was a disastrous and shameful mass exodus of Azerbaijani-Armenians to Russia and elsewhere. In the years following the U.S invasion of Iraq, several thousand Iraqi-Armenians fled the war and civil strife. Armenia failed to organize their migration and settlement. Thus it lost a golden opportunity to embrace hard-working and law-abiding Middle Eastern Armenians who could have added value to society and to the economy.

The lackadaisical/reluctant behavior of the RoA governments to protect and preserve their overseas brethren means Yerevan authorities do not believe in regrouping and consolidating Armenian communities and groups within the boundaries of the RoA. Or it does not believe in the second (regrouping) and for that reason it does not initiate steps to the first (protection and preservation). Instead, we see haphazard actions, belated and potentially harmful diplomatic movements (visiting Assad when no one other than Russian and Iranian diplomats visits him) by the ministry of foreign affairs, and unfocused activities by the ministry of diaspora. The latter seems to confine its activities to cultural matters rather than seek permanent solutions to crucial problems.

Long-term thinking and long-term strategy with a clear vision and mission are missing in the RoA government. Either this is due to the absence of a pragmatic-practical work methodology or it's reluctance to take on the responsibility of regrouping of Armenians in one state.

The RoA asserts that it does not have the financial means to organize the evacuation of Syrian-Armenians and settle them in Armenia. This is not true. In the last four years (which corresponds to the duration of the Syrian conflict) the Armenian government has borrowed money from global financial institutions estimated at \$400 million and has issued bonds totaling \$700 million. These have resulted to a public debt of \$4.6 billion over a mediocre annual GDP of \$11 billion per 2014 (adjusted for exchange rates). Most of the loans were not utilized for long-term, sustainable economic activities or for the creation of jobs or to solve housing problems for the local needy or the refugees. Government officials have spent exorbitant amounts on cars, entertainment, travel abroad, and on non-tangible projects. A country with budgetary deficit, current account deficit and meager economic growth can't afford the luxury of non-essential business assignments abroad or to borrow for funding consultancy projects.

The ministry of diaspora has organized "Come Home" (Ari Doun/Ari Tun) program and this year it is

sponsoring up to 1,100 children. This is a significant expenditure for the ministry. Is it necessary? Maybe yes, but is it a priority? No.

Evacuating Syrian-Armenians and settling them in Lebanon or in Armenia is a national priority. The government of the RoA has the ability to accomplish it. Instead of wasting borrowed money on non-effective projects, it can borrow from local financial markets and international institutions (\$60 to \$70 million) and obtain aid from international organizations such as the IRC (International Rescue Committee), USAID (United States Aid), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)-- which has helped Syrian refugees by providing \$320 million in 2014, CARE International and Armenian institutions such as the AMAA (Armenian Missionary Association of America)--Syria relief, AGBU, the Armenian Church (Echmiadzin and Antelias). Both should halt their religious construction spree and help construct home for Armenians in the RoA. The All Armenia Fund--roads are not more important than people--should also pitch in.

The above can ensure funds of around \$80 million to \$100 million which is enough to build 40 buildings for 1,600 families on a non-sale, non-transferable basis. The loan part of the fund can be paid to the government over 30 years by the residents of those houses with below-market interest rates. Of course, the relevant ministries may set eligibility criteria to provide housing or housing assistance.

Building residencies should have been launched in the past four years and then the Syrian evacuation could have followed. Israel evacuated and brought home tens of thousands of Jews from Africa through massive operations called "Operation Solomon" and "Operation Moses" in the '80s and the '90s. Government-chartered planes flew round the clock to provide transportation in what was called air-bridge between Ethiopia and Israel. In Israel housing construction and the organizing of the influx of Jews is an ongoing process. There is even a ministry called "Ministry of Aliyah and Immigration Absorption" (Aliyah means ascension in Hebrew).

What is the first goal of the ministry of diaspora in the RoA? Is it stated anywhere? As for Diaspora efforts, it was shameful and mind-boggling to see how Lebanese-Armenians commemorated the Genocide centennial by putting crosses at the bottom of the Mediterranean, flying lanterns in the air, making pillows with "forget-me-not" flower designs, giving endless speeches and organizing cycling races, and engaging in every sort of superficial activity which added nothing to our collective survival fight or national cause. It was amazing and frustrating to witness the precious time and money wasted for self-satisfaction rather than to protect and preserve our people.

Half of the houses and flats in Bourj Hammoud district of Beirut have been emptied of Armenians. The latter leave the area to settle in other regions and convert their homes into stores, workshops or sell/rent them to non-Armenians, specifically to Shiite Lebanese and Syrian Kurds. A question: why would we prefer renting our empty houses to Syrian-Kurds who are refugees in Lebanon rather than share those houses with Syrian-Armenians (or give them at low rents)? Why can't the Cilicia See

provide those people with homes, apartments and buildings just as it did in the '80s to Lebanese Armenians in Bourj Hammoud and in Fanar?

It can't because it has diverted its attention--and money--to many other issues other than the Aleppo Armenians. Building a monument inside the premises of another monument in Bikfaya (Lebanon) has been a priority for Antelias. Building a large and costly school to replace existing free secondary schools of the Armenian Prelacy of Lebanon has become a priority in recent years. Filing a case against Turkey might be necessary and interesting step towards demanding our ancestral rights and properties, but who needs those if we are going to lose our people? Who needs to win a case against Turkey (by paying hefty fees to international human rights lawyers) when the physical existence of a portion of our people is endangered?

Isn't encouraging Aleppo Armenians to stay where they are and face bombs and the hateful backlash of militants a mistake? Isn't making Aleppo Armenians believe for four long years that Assad will regain control of Syria and restore peace and order a mistake? Isn't siding with Assad covertly and overtly, and burying our heads in the sand (pretending rebel Syrians will not know about our real stance or would not care) a mistake? Isn't tying the destiny of 20,000 Armenians--or whatever is left--to one man's rule a risk and a mistake? What if Assad died tomorrow or left the country without "warning his Armenian citizens"? Kessab Armenians fled their villages and homes in March 2014. While they returned, they live under constant fear of another attack or a permanent exodus from their villages. Do we have Plan B? Is running away to nearby Latakia our only plan?

Talking about what we could have done politically or diplomatically is not within the scope of this article. I have concentrated on the humanitarian and national aspect of the situation. The least that we could have done was to have arranged the transportation of Aleppo Armenians to Lebanon and onwards to the RoA. Upon arrival in the RoA, the government should have provided them with residences (free or on a 30-year payable loan basis). This is how we help our people and this is how through helping our people we strengthen and revitalize our homeland.

The situation is critical. What happened to Iraqi- and Syrian-Armenians can happen to the Armenians of Lebanon and of Iran. Looking at the geopolitics of Middle East, such scenarios are not impossible. The question is: Are we ready as a nation and state to face such existential issues? Do we prepare for such scenarios and try not only to minimize our losses but also to take advantage and strengthen the RoA qualitatively and quantitatively?

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