

YEREVAN SCRAMBLES...AGAIN

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✘ Keghart.com Editorial Board, 1 August 2012

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Individuals, cultural associations, the Church and political organizations have time and again faced the question: "what next?" They have thought and devised contingency plans, understandably on small scales. If nothing else, one would think the tragic events in Iraq would have alerted the government of Armenia to assess the geopolitics of the Middle East, draw the necessary conclusions and devise plans for the eventuality of various scenarios. Moreover, recent developments in and around Syria, which have acutely resurfaced for the past year or so and its implications for the Armenian community, should have not escaped the attention of the ruling elite in Yerevan.

In the 11th hour we notice that the authorities of Armenia have taken much-needed first steps, and that only as a reaction to scandals and fiasco, rather than because of forethought and planning at state level. Armavia, the Armenian Airlines, maliciously increased the ticket price of the Yerevan-Aleppo flight sector, taking advantage of the tragic situation of Armenians trying to flee to Yerevan from Syria. Subsequently, under public pressure the "Armenian" airline was forced to reduce its prices. The profiteering should have never been allowed in the first place. It's beyond comprehension why Syrian Armenians, as a matter of fact any Armenian, should wait for months to get an entry visa. Yet this inexplicable and ignoble practice was allowed throughout the Syrian crisis. Why? It was only recently that the matter was resolved and the Ministry of Diaspora proposed measures to streamline granting Armenian passports to Syrian-Armenians.

We thank the "National Association of Sinjar Yezidis" for their solidarity and concern, yet it is simply sad to see a *non-Armenian* organization telling us, Armenians, and the government of Armenia what

should have been done with respect to fellow Armenians living outside Armenia. A recent statement of the association read, "As we see it in Armenia, they were not too prepared to receive our Syrian-Armenian brothers and sisters on a state level." It added, "We stand ready to support, to the extent of our capacity, our brothers and sisters who are emigrating from Syria to Armenia. Let us hope our assistance will be timely and appropriate."

Let's not single out the Armenian state, which by and large, if not insensitive to Diaspora concerns on major issues, has demonstrated a distinct disconnect in understanding the psychology and aspirations of Diaspora individuals and communities. Diasporans, too, have lacked a much-needed unified, cohesive and realistic plan(s) to handle major crises. This is not a judgmental statement but a record of the facts. The Civil War in Lebanon that started in the mid-'70s, in addition to the much praised "positive neutrality", underlined two major trends that have chronically "afflicted" the Armenian communities in the Middle East.

AGBU was founded in 1906 ostensibly to take care of Armenian orphans, give them shelter and keep them **close to their homeland Armenia**. That mission became more important and was intensely implemented following the Genocide of Armenians. It prevailed for more than a half century. Ironically, it was Louise Manoogian Simone (president of AGBU 1989-2002) and her circle that during and after the Lebanese Civil War advocated exodus of Armenians to the West from crises-prone Middle Eastern countries. Many individuals within AGBU and friendly organizations criticized this approach calling it "defeatist" and contrary to Armenian aspirations and interests.

The Catholicosate of Cilicia and supporting organizations, on the contrary, advocated resistance to exodus and promoted the preservation of the Middle Eastern Armenian communities. The lessons of Armenians leaving for the West following the Israeli-Arab wars, the Egyptian Revolution and the emigration of Middle East Armenians to America through the misguided efforts of the American National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians (ANCHA) in the not so distant past were revealing. Nurturing Armenianness and Armenian communities in the West, away from the proximity of physical Armenia, were not easy and were fraught with dubious outcomes.

Don't we face the same dilemma today? We do, and we know it as individuals and as collectives. The stakes are high without clear-cut solutions. No matter what stand we advocate, ultimately it falls upon individuals to make their choices: remain where they are resisting the temptation of exodus, repatriate to Armenia or leave for green pastures in the West with the uncertainty of preserving an Armenian identity in the future.

We hope and wish that recent developments in Syria and their ramifications on Armenian communities will serve as a wake-up call to authorities in Armenia and Armenian organizations in the Diaspora to collectively devise plans which would address similar calamities in the future. There should be more than one option, and clear description of what the outcome of each option could entail. Advocating one solution as opposed to the others is simply unrealistic and at times may lead

to disasters for individuals and families, not to mention recrimination and admonition.

