

DEFINING NATION AND STATE

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By [Vahan Zanoyan](#), USA, 1 February 2024

“For what will profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?”

—Mark 8, 36.

There is an Armenian State today because the Armenian nation persisted when it was stateless. The Nation is larger than the State by all measures—population, history, economic and financial resources, education levels, diplomatic skills, global reach, and overall competence levels. The nation is also more permanent than the state; it has survived without a state for most of its history. During centuries when there was no Armenian state, it was the nation, with its steadfast attachment to its culture, language, literature, faith, traditions, historical legacy, collective memory, and a resolute awareness of its own history, that kept the hope and *the prospect of an eventual State* alive.

It would thus be the ultimate historical irony if the State, which owes its existence to the resilience of the nation, were to decide that the nation's identity and historical legacy are no longer part of its own identity and history. *The State is entrusted to safeguard something much larger than itself.* The State is both a goal in itself and, much more importantly, an instrument to uphold national identity, culture, and historic rights. It is a protection against allowing the nation to be left at the mercy of the cultural dominance and lifestyles of other states.

A State stripped of the timeless legacy of its nation is like a body without a soul. It is a robot that goes through the motions of economic growth and trade, strictly for the purpose of economic growth and trade. It gets reduced to the least common denominator that all other states in the world share, and *nothing more*. As far as its unique national character is concerned, it is clinically dead.

What would an Armenian State turn into if stripped of its Armenian character and historical legacy? That, as much if not more than the military threats posed by Azerbaijan's dictatorial regime, is the existential question hanging over the Armenian nation and the Republic of Armenia today. Ironically, that threat is nurtured from within, even if it has some formidable cheerleaders from outside.

The last attempt in recent history to bury the Armenian national identity in a soulless collective was during the Soviet Union. Two to three generations were raised to be model Soviet citizens and Soviet persons. Nationality was deemed to be a burden weighing down on the Soviet man's journey towards Communism. But even in the darkest years of Stalinist repression, when some of the brightest minds of the Armenian nation, along with hundreds of thousands of innocent people were being purged, the nation pushed back. Intellectual giants such as Hratchya Ajarian, scientists such as Victor Hambartsumian, poets such as Isahakian, Shiraz, Charents, Kaputikyan, artists such as Yervand Kochar, and many, many others, kept the flame of national awareness alive, often secretly and as often by risking their lives. The national resistance against assimilation into the vast void of Soviet identity was formidable, eventually resulting in grassroots popular outbursts in 1965 and 1988.

The survivors of the Armenian Genocide demonstrated even stronger determination not to lose their

national identity. The first generation of the survivors is especially noteworthy, because, arriving at totally unfamiliar and foreign lands, barely alive, having lost all material, emotional and spiritual connection to a life it once had, it started all over again with a single-minded determination not to lose its national identity and culture, lest the perpetrators of the Genocide achieve their goal. Communities who could barely scrape enough to feed their children opened schools, built churches, theaters, cultural and sports clubs, all in the name of «hayabahbanoum», guardianship of Armenianness. Armenian schools flourished and excelled in their host countries, with graduates not only excelling in universities and later in their chosen professions, but also in developing a keen sense of their history and ancestry. Professional excellence and a strong national education were never mutually exclusive.

Then, what had seemed a distant, unlikely dream came to pass. After 543 years of statelessness, the First Republic was born. A nation just expelled from its ancestral lands and its history, massacred, ethnically cleansed, having lost over 1.5 million people, established a State. It did not last long, being squeezed between the newly formed Soviet Empire and the dying Ottoman Empire. But it still fought for its national identity, despite all the efforts of the Bolsheviks to erase it.

Finally, even the Soviet Empire collapsed.

One would think that this nation, which, against all odds has maintained its unique culture through several centuries of foreign rule, having finally gained its own independent sovereign state, would double up on its genetic capacity to survive, to struggle, to **fight** for a high national purpose, rather than succumb to the pressure to turn its rare and precious Statehood into a sterilized generic entity void of national character and historical context.

And yet, that is the path that the Armenian government seems to have adopted. At least all the telltale signs seem to be pointing in that direction, the most direct and ominous being the government's adopted position that its sole responsibility is whatever lies within the 29,800 sq km area that it recognizes and accepts as the territory of the Republic of Armenia (never mind that Armenia's most immediate and aggressive enemy, Azerbaijan, has yet to recognize the same area as sovereign Armenian territory, part of which it still occupies). Everything that falls out of that area—which includes some of the richest and most valuable Armenian historical and cultural legacy—is deemed to fall outside the scope of responsibility of the Armenian State, and therefore irrelevant to it. The first direct casualty of this approach was Artsakh, a millennia-old Armenian homeland.

One of the standard practices of the Soviet authorities aimed at stifling national sentiments in Armenia was to drive a wedge between the local population and the Diaspora. Contact with compatriots abroad was strictly controlled and monitored. The policy was applied especially strictly toward repatriated Armenians who had relatives abroad. They were treated with suspicion, and many were exiled to Siberia for the crime of being suspected of being nationalistic. But both local

intellectuals and Diasporan organizations fought this policy. Armenian literary magazines and periodicals published in the Diaspora were regularly smuggled into Soviet Armenia, and treasured by local intellectuals, passed from hand to hand and read with a passion.

Narrowing the government's focus from the nation to the current Republic achieves the result which the Soviet authorities intended to achieve, without coercion and without wagonloads of exiles to Siberia. It alienates a substantial portion of the nation who live outside of the 29,800 sq km area but have a profound attachment both to the country and to the nation at large. Specific policies and some declared intentions that formalize and deepen the schism between the country and the nation include:

changing the Armenian History course to The History of Armenia in schools, rewriting history books to appease the whims of Azerbaijan and Turkey, admitting that sections in the Constitution of the Republic Armenia are offensive to Azerbaijan and therefore need to be rewritten, succumbing to pressure from Turkey to discard Genocide recognition as a State objective (when Erdogan himself recently proudly and publicly [bragged](#) about Turkey's massacre of the Greek population of Smyrna), questioning the appropriateness of the country's [Coat of Arms](#) to the Republic that was formed in 1991, and teaching schoolchildren that those who say Ararat is our highest mountain are not talking [about Armenia](#) but about something else.

While the Armenian nation fought back successfully, albeit with major sacrifices, when the Soviet Union tried to dissolve its national identity into a communal political notion, the current move in the same direction is more elusive and dangerous, because it is being stirred from within the country and is being led by the government, with significant prompts and encouragement from outside. National identity and character face the same threat of an amorphous global anonymity, whether it comes from Communism, Open Society, or direct demands from Turkey and Azerbaijan to tone down patriotic rhetoric in Armenia.

Fortunately, the now infamous 7th grade history book has met serious [resistance](#) from teachers and historians. Some teachers have gone as far as advocating a [boycott](#) of the book. Veteran academicians and historians have also come out with their public criticism both of the 7th grade history book and of changing the name of the course from Armenian History to The History of Armenia. This is encouraging, but the uproar needs to be more broad-based to attract the attention of the populist government in Yerevan. Parents concerned with the education of their children must join the fight, not just by opposing the new history book, but also by organizing and introducing proper history instruction at home, to emphasize their lack of confidence in the curriculum of the government.

It is important to realize that ultimately, all of this boils down to National Security. National Security is about all the factors that makes a nation willing and able to defend its homeland. A modern, competitive army is obviously at the very core of the system and the main active ingredient. But

even if Armenia had that today (which it does not) it would not be enough. The first orbit of enabling factors around that core includes military intelligence, military reform, competence in legal, diplomatic and information campaigns, economic security, and global competitiveness. A second, outer, orbit or shield is less tangible but equally critical: Sense of nationhood, historical legacy and context, national dignity, social justice, balanced education system, demographic management, national strategic vision, national values, ownership of a unique culture, keen sense of national identity and of national historic rights. Once that outer layer is pierced, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the rest of the national security apparatus functional.

While a State must have a defined geographic area recognized by the international community, its defense cannot be understood purely in geographic terms. Armies defend a homeland, not just real estate. What any soldier fights for cannot be measured by square kilometers. What makes that homeland is all the factors listed above as part of the outer orbit of national security. Decoupling the government agenda from a national agenda in the name of "saving the state," which necessitates forsaking the pursuit of historic national rights, is internally contradictory and self-defeating, and puts the interests of *both* the state and the nation at great risk.

The Armenian nation does not need just a state. It needs a *Nation* State. Most of the Diaspora, as well as most of the current citizens and residents of Armenia, have much better options than the Republic of Armenia if all it had to offer was a non-national state where they could live in peace and earn a living. Armenians can live in peace better and earn a better living in any country in Europe, the US, Canada, or the Middle East. Some would do better even in today's Russia. What attracts them to Armenia is that it is a *nation* state—that is what differentiates Armenia from all other countries and *fills a need that no other country, no matter how prosperous and free, can fill*. If the Armenian State decides to rid itself of its national content, it will no longer have anything to offer to the Armenian population either in Armenia or in the rest of the world.

Anyone who takes a careful look at the map of Armenia and the region, will see that the Republic of Armenia cannot be defended without the entire Nation that gave birth to it. This is what any governing body of the Republic must understand. Today's government not only does not understand this but outright rejects the premise. It needs to take a better look at the map and its nation's history. As mentioned earlier, the first direct casualty of this failure was Artsakh, an integral part of the Armenian homeland, which was recently subjected, in full view of the world, to complete ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan. This could indeed be the precursor or more heavy losses if the government fails to chart a new course.

Author's Note: *This article discusses issues and critiques specific policies of the government of Armenia. It intentionally does not name any Armenian government official, and does not use derogatory adjectives, in order to remain faithful to the recommendations of another [article](#) on literate and*

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Vahan Zanoyan is a global energy and security specialist. Over a span of thirty-five years, he has advised fifteen different governments on economic development policy, energy sector strategy, national security, and global competitiveness. He has also served as a consultant to numerous international and national oil companies, banks, and other public and private organizations. Mr. Zanoyan supports several initiatives of the [Network State](#).

Comments



Vahe Apelian – 2024-02-21 23:58:21

What Vahan Zanoyan wrote reminded me of the lyrics of the song “Yerevan Erepouni” whose lyrics is written by Baruyr Sevag. I will quote a quadrant from the song in Armenian then resort to the extremely difficult task of translating it. The actual quote reads: **Մենք արյան կանչեր ունենք մեր սրտում, Անկատար տենչեր ունենք դեռ շատ: Մեր կանչն առանց քեզ իզուր կկորչի, Առանց քեզ մեր տաք տենչն էլ կսառչի:** Instead of translating it myself, I let Google do the job. I do not think there is an English word that can truly convey the meaning of the Armenian word “dentch – տենչ» Understandably Google translated it as follows: We have calls for blood in our hearts, We still have many unaccomplished desires. Our call will be lost without you, Without you, our hot desire will also cool down. Now, substitute Yerevan-Erepouni by the State of Armenia and you will pretty much get the idea of what Vahan Zanoyan is conveying. Surely, it is easy to have the quadrant as the lyrics of the famous patriotic song. The problem is putting its soul in the wording of the charter of the State. In order to have a meaningful discussion on this important matter, I invite Vahan or anyone else to word the Armenian Declaration of Independence. It is somewhat long, not awfully long for anyone to word it as if he was laying down Armenia's charter, its Declaration of Independence, the famous “Hrchagagir – Հռչակագիր”, on which Armenia writes its constitution. We may then have real life meaningful discussion and exchange of views.



H – 2024-02-05 23:03:59

Vahan, Your article presents no fiction, and no utopia. Nor does it express personal opinion. It is a passionate reminder of historic facts to help Armenians in Armenia realize the heritage of our values, language, culture, and history; all about to be lost under outside pressure. And for the diaspora Armenians to continue to preserve and cherish. You said it all.



Benny Shohmelian – 2024-02-05 01:46:59

Thank you Mr. Vahan Zanoyan for this article. You straightened my thoughts on this matter.



Sylvie - 2024-02-04 15:30:21

A very realistic approach to the existence, survival and living of the state.