

PROBLEMS OF SELF-ORGANISATION OF ARMENIANS IN THE MODERN PHASE OF THE ARMENIAN QUESTION*

Following Armenia's independence, the Armenian Question entered into a new, complex and extremely volatile phase, which has required mobilizing and activating the potential of all Armenians. Some attempts are being made to find answers and propose solutions to the current most complex challenges. One such attempt has been a recent initiative to establish abroad (not on RoA territory) a Western Armenian authority in exile – representative bodies of Western Armenians (a National Assembly and a Government – “a National Council”.) Similar initiatives are known to have taken place in the United States and France as well. The latest of them was the “Appeal to the Descendants of the Armenians Who Survived the Genocide in Western Armenia, for Establishment of Their Own Representations in Exile”, published in the “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” official daily of 25 October and “Golos Armenii” Russian-language newspaper of 31 October 2006 (both Yerevan-based publications), which was signed by a number of well known representatives of the intelligentsia and social-political personalities, including Ara Abrahamyan, Narek Abrahamyan, Armen Jigarkhanyan, Sos Sargsyan, Vahagn Dadrian, and even by some state and military officials, such as the NKR Prime Minister and the Advisor to RoA Defense Minister. Despite the fact that the latter have underscored that they signed “in individual capacity”, ostensibly they could not have done so without the consent of their superiors – which actually bestows an altogether serious tone to this initiative.

The first consultations on founding a Western Armenian plenipotentiary Authority in exile were held in Paris (Sevres) on 11 and 12 December 2006. (For information on this see “Zartonk” of 5 January 2007, “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” of 06 January 2007 and “Golos Armenii” of 20 January 2007.) The initiative has come mainly from some Diasporan Armenians.

What is at issue?

Indisputably, the Armenian Diaspora is disorganized and, as a result, in a weak condition. The political activists, including traditional political parties, engage but only a small fraction of the Armenians. The organising of the Diaspora, including the electing of representative bodies, and formulation of a well thought-out programme and unified budget have long been an imperative. But organizing and strengthening the Diaspora in this way is one thing, and creating a Western Armenian authority in exile an altogether different one, and, we are convinced, an undertaking fraught with problems.

There are a few particularly unacceptable stipulations in the “Appeal”. One of them says (as quoted from the English version of the “Appeal”): *“a distinct distribution of duties and roles between the segments of the whole Armenianhood could contribute to a successful solution of the national tasks, enable normalizing of the relations between the Republic of Armenia and its neighboring states, which, in its turn, will reduce its dependence on possible consequences of the international political confrontation.”* On this basis, one may presume that if the Western Armenian would-be Government in Paris, Moscow or Washington D.C. were to summon a session and, according to shared tasks and responsibilities (i.e., *“a distinct distribution of duties and roles”*), were to raise the issue of the return of the territories of Western Armenia or that of material compensation, then Turkey would not have grounds to accuse the Republic of Armenia of anything, since it could be asserted: “What does Armenia have to do with this? After all it is not Armenia which has raised this issue!” Following this interpretation, the RoA Government would deal only with Artsakh and the other “local” issues, etc.

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This idealization is simply naive. When France adopted a resolution on the Armenian Genocide in 2001, Turkey retaliated *against Armenia* with the tightening of the visa regime for RoA citizens, blocking air traffic and making new threats. The Turks fully realize that at this juncture it is the Republic of Armenia that is of paramount importance – an actually existing state on an actual territory. Such sleights of hand wouldn't succeed in deceiving anyone. Turkey is also aware that as long as there exists the Republic of Armenia and there exists people living on that land, any serious threats (if not militarily, then at least diplomatic, informational and other fronts) to it will emanate just from there! Our compatriots living in the United States, France, Russia or elsewhere are only secondary, if not tertiary threats to Turkey. If Turkey and Azerbaijan succeed to jointly destroy the republics of Armenia and Nagorno-Kharabagh, they will recognize the Armenian Genocide the very next day, because this recognition will be of no consequence to Turkey any longer. The Armenians in the USA, Europe or Australia may organize demonstrations and rallies all they want – these will be of no significance. Nothing that the Armenians may do then will matter any longer since there won't be a body, a state, to which the Turks would have to account to – literally or metaphorically.

Another point of the “Appeal” stipulates (as quoted from the English version of the Appeal): *“the present Republic of Armenia which was established after the second collapse of the Soviet turned Russia and on a part of the territory of Eastern Armenia, on the territory of Soviet Armenia, twice as little as the first Armenian Republic, is de jure not an assignee of the first Armenian Republic and has no authority from the representative bodies of the Western Armenians to represent their interests and what is more is not able of undertaking the solution of the specific issues related to the fortune of the descendents of the Western Armenians and Western Armenia.”*

We must observe that the statement that the RoA *“is de jure not an assignee (i.e., successor) of the first Armenian Republic”*, is a very dangerous one, and the entire paragraph above is completely inaccurate. Why is it that the RoA cannot have jurisdiction to represent the interests of Western Armenians? If we follow the logic of that assertion of the “Appeal”, we will arrive at the conclusion that Artsakh should be defended only by the Artsakhtsis, Syunik only by the Syunetsis and Western Armenia only by the descendents of those who lived on that land. But the Homeland – Armenia – is one: Western Armenia, Eastern Armenia, Artsakh, Javakhk and Nakhijevan each one and all together constitute Armenia. This applies to the RoA and NKR also in the political sense, and to Javakhk at least demographically, and to all other cases historically. The Gyumretsi, Vanadzortsi, Yerevantsi or an Armenian living abroad have as many – no more and no less – national rights and moral responsibilities, say, for Artsakh, as does the Artsakhtsi himself, because Artsakh is a homeland of the Armenians, part of the land of Armenia. By the same token, the Artsakhtsi, for example, is morally responsible for the native land in Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor or Van. However, the political situation and objective conditions may give different shapes and forms to the fulfillment of these rights and responsibilities.

Let us suppose for a moment that a Western Armenian authority in exile did get established after all; then it is imperative to clarify: will it be capable of playing a role, or how seriously will it be treated?

First, the Armenians do not need several governments, one is fully sufficient for us. Evidently, an artificially created authority cannot play a serious role, because it will not have the status or the other state jurisdictions (attributes) of an internationally recognized sovereign state. It is a different matter that, unfortunately, today the RoA does not take up the mission and responsibility of dealing with the question of Western Armenia. In fact, some of the postulates of the “Appeal” correspond to the RoA *national security strategy* adopted recently (February 2007)

by the RoA Government. Therefore it is possible to assume that our government is somewhat agreeable to these sort of initiatives. The fact that the “Appeal” was signed by the aforementioned high ranking officials, and its publication in “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” official newspaper testifies to this.

The concept of “Western Armenia” is completely missing from the RoA national security strategy, which is a serious mistake. It goes without saying that the Artsakh issue is a constituent part of the Armenian Question, so why should not the issue of Western Armenia be stated along with it? Forced separation of Artsakh from Armenia and its forced annexation to Azerbaijan were the direct consequences of the Armenian Genocide, as was the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Nakhijevan. Accordingly, if the fact of genocide is recognized so must be the necessity for overcoming the consequences of it.

The Armenian government too has its share of fault in this; it failed or did not want to present the issue comprehensively and in a complete manner. What was the purpose of the Armenian Genocide? It was not so much for the physical extermination of the Armenian ethnos as it was for the elimination of Armenia – a country, which had all demographic, ideological, political and cultural capacities and potential to re-establish an independent statehood. **The bottom line is that the Genocide of Armenians was aimed against the possibility of restoring Armenian Statehood.** Essentially, Armenians got exterminated for being the very bearers of that probability and capability. The annihilation of Armenians in the parts of Ottoman Empire lying outside Western Armenia and Cilicia, aimed likewise to nullify any possible future claims by the Armenians to their ancestral land. Thus, the objective was the destruction of Armenia and the means – annihilation of Armenians, first and foremost, on their own land in Armenia. Exterminated were the elite of the Armenian people, the social structure, the old and well-ramified structures of the church, education and community life – the entire Armenian culture having had evolved on that land. Most importantly, the consequence of the Genocide was the loss of a territory of land which had been home Armenians for five thousand uninterrupted years. Consequently, the Armenian Question, in essence, is a territorial issue, a land issue altogether. And the Artsakh issue, after all, is a territorial issue. By presenting the Artsakh problem merely as the right to self-determination of the people inhabiting it, we weaken our stand on the negotiations front in particular and in the overall Armenian Question in general.

It is important that we understand the essence of the Armenian Question accurately – **it has been and remains in the creation of viable political and territorial conditions for the Armenian people to live freely and independently on its native soil of the Armenian Highland. There is only one solution to the Armenian Question – to restore the Armenian statehood if not in entire Armenia (350,000 sq/km), then at least on a substantial piece of it, such that safe and long term existence and development of Armenian civilization can be secured.** In other words, the Armenian Question is about the security of the Armenians, and it requires the provision of two prerequisites: The **first** is the creation of a comprehensive and strong statehood, and the second is the territorial guarantees fortifying the security and viability of that statehood.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian Question became reanimated and started to proceed in a somewhat haphazard manner. The transformations of the Armenian Question were vividly reflected and continue to be reflected in the following four directions:

- a) In the fundamental issue of Artsakh, including the three-year large scale war for the liberation of that vitally important part of Armenia;
- b) In the fundamental issue of Javakhk, which is in no respect of less importance and lately has visibly grown in tension;
- c) In the international recognitions, denials and abuses of the Armenian genocide;

- d) In Armenian-Turkish relations, including the issues of overcoming the consequences of the genocide carried out against Armenians in Western Armenia and in other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

Indeed, in 1988 the Armenian Question was in one condition, in 1991, in a different, in 1994, in another and now still another, and one which is significantly unlike the previous ones.

These four directions are very much interrelated; each containing great dangers, and a defeat in any one of them could potentially devastate all Armenians.

Thus, the Armenian homeland is one and indivisible. This cannot be subject to argument. The issue is in the political and legal expediency of the following: whether or not to establish a Western Armenian government, which will regard itself as a body legally commensurate with RoA and which will try to represent issues concerning Armenians from the perspective of its own strategy and assessment of the reality, or to create empowered representative bodies of Armenians living abroad – bodies ostensibly better able to support progress on issues facing the Armenian nation.

In our opinion, it is preferable not to set up such a “second” parallel governmental structure.

From the perspective of legal expediency, we must note the following:

1. At least half of RoA citizens are the descendents of Western Armenians; therefore RoA needs no additional authority or legitimacy to represent the cause of Western Armenia.

2. The would-be representative bodies of Western Armenians can never have such high legal status as has the Republic of Armenia as an independent and internationally recognized sovereign state. As such, RoA has exclusive rights and responsibilities to present these issues in the international arena, including at the United Nation’s International Court of Justice in The Hague. These are rights and capacities, which no Armenian organization of lower status has or may ever have, regardless of it being granted parliamentary or governmental status. Particularly, as a signatory to the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (23 June 1993), RoA has exclusive rights to invoke Article VIII of the Convention against Turkey (a signatory since 31 July 1950), which provides that any contracting party may call upon the competent organs of the United Nations to take such action as they consider appropriate for the “suppression” of genocide. A number of prominent experts in international law contend that:

“suppression” must mean more than just retributive justice. In order to suppress the crime, it is necessary to suppress, as far as possible, its consequences. This entails, besides punishing the guilty, providing restitution and compensation to the surviving generations¹.

That is, these measures could include also compensations in the form of territorial concessions.

RoA can apply also Article IX of the Convention, which declares: “*Disputes between the Contracting Parties relating to the interpretation, application or fulfilment of the present Convention, including those relating to the responsibility of a State for genocide or for any of the other acts enumerated in article III, shall be submitted to the International Court of Justice at the request of any of the parties to the dispute.*” As de Zayas notes, “An objection on the part of Turkey about the standing of Armenia to represent the rights of the descendants of the survivors of the genocide is countered by the fact that many descendants are citizens of Armenia; reference to the “protective principle” enunciated by the District Court of Israel in the *Eichmann* case can also be made in this context. Moreover, Armenia could offer Armenian citizenship to all Armenians in the diaspora, as Russia has done with respect to former citizens of the Soviet Union residing in the Baltic States and other former republics of the Soviet Union.”

¹ Alfred de Zayas, J.D. (Harvard), Dr. Phil. (Göttingen), *Memorandum on the Genocide against the Armenians 1915-1923 and the Application of the 1948 Genocide Convention*, Brussels: EAFJD, 2003.

3. How should the Diaspora Armenians from Eastern Armenia – immigrants from the Republic of Armenia, Artsakh, Nakhijevan, Georgia and Azerbaijan, who today perhaps equal in numbers to Western Armenian – participate in the creation of the Western Armenian representative bodies? This question remains unaddressed and can therefore cause new disagreements and divisions. It is still an open question whether the declaration of Artsakh as an independent state which took place under the extraordinary circumstances was the optimal decision. Or, should we have instead declared Artsakh's reunification with Armenia? How suitable is it to create new Armenian governments - and those - abroad, cut off from the actual homeland – when there already exists an independent state, at least *de jure*, recognized by all?

From the perspective of political expediency:

1. How suitable is it to separate the integral parts of the Armenian question from each other and conduct a form of 'separation of labor' on this issue? Are we not weakening ourselves on the issues of Artsakh, Javakhk and Nakhijevan? It is pointless to recognize and condemn the genocide on one hand, and recognize Azerbaijan's "territorial integrity" on the other (as some states have done in recent years), while concurrently refusing to accept the right of Artsakh Armenians to self-determination as well as the right of Armenia to have secure and natural borders.

2. Another point of concern is that even if RoA, with all its state structures, were to fall under nearly complete dependency upon foreign powers, couldn't the would-be Western Armenian government in exile possibly fall into the same trap? What should be done to avoid this scenario? I believe this question must be tackled very early on before it is too late.

Finally, the psychological suitability aspect considered as well. On the example of Artsakh, we know better now that the declaration of independence and creation of state bodies in one part of Armenia, done on tactical considerations, have resulted in certain transformations in our national identity, manifested particularly in the "Gharabaghtsi–Hayastantsi" tensions. Such undesirable phenomena will be much more destructive to the collective psyche of our compatriots living far away from the homeland – on foreign lands and in foreign environments – not to mention its concomitant manifestation in Armenia proper.

While the physical security of Soviet Armenia was guaranteed until the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the international efforts of Diaspora Armenians could focus on the recognition and condemnation of the Armenian genocide, the reality of the post-Soviet era calls for different approaches and actions, which, unfortunately, are long overdue. In particular, one of the urgent necessary actions is to organize a repatriation of Armenians to the Republic of Armenia– the only territory where exists an Armenian political authority and armed forces. Unfortunately, the second statement by the initiative group repeats the same mistakes – Western Armenia is called the homeland of Western Armenians and the just resolution of the Armenian question is divided between "Eastern Armenia and Western Armenia perspectives" (see "Hayastani Hanrapetutyun" of 16 January 2007). The authors also speak about an issue that is just infeasible and imaginary: "Western Armenians and their descendents wish to return to their homeland – Western Armenia – safely and unimpeded." This formulation suggests an ill-posed definition of homeland, because, to repeat, Western Armenia is as much the homeland of Eastern Armenians as Eastern Armenia is the homeland of Western Armenians.

Nevertheless, the issues configured in the "Appeal" are important. The main subject of the "Appeal" is particularly crucial – to unify Diaspora Armenians and create representative bodies. However, this should not be done based on political claims on any part of Armenia (in this case – for Western Armenia), as the authors of the "Appeal" intend to do, but by creating such a representative body of Armenians that will be capable of uniting the entire Diaspora – all immigrants from all parts of Armenia – aiming to help find solutions to the current pan-national issues.

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