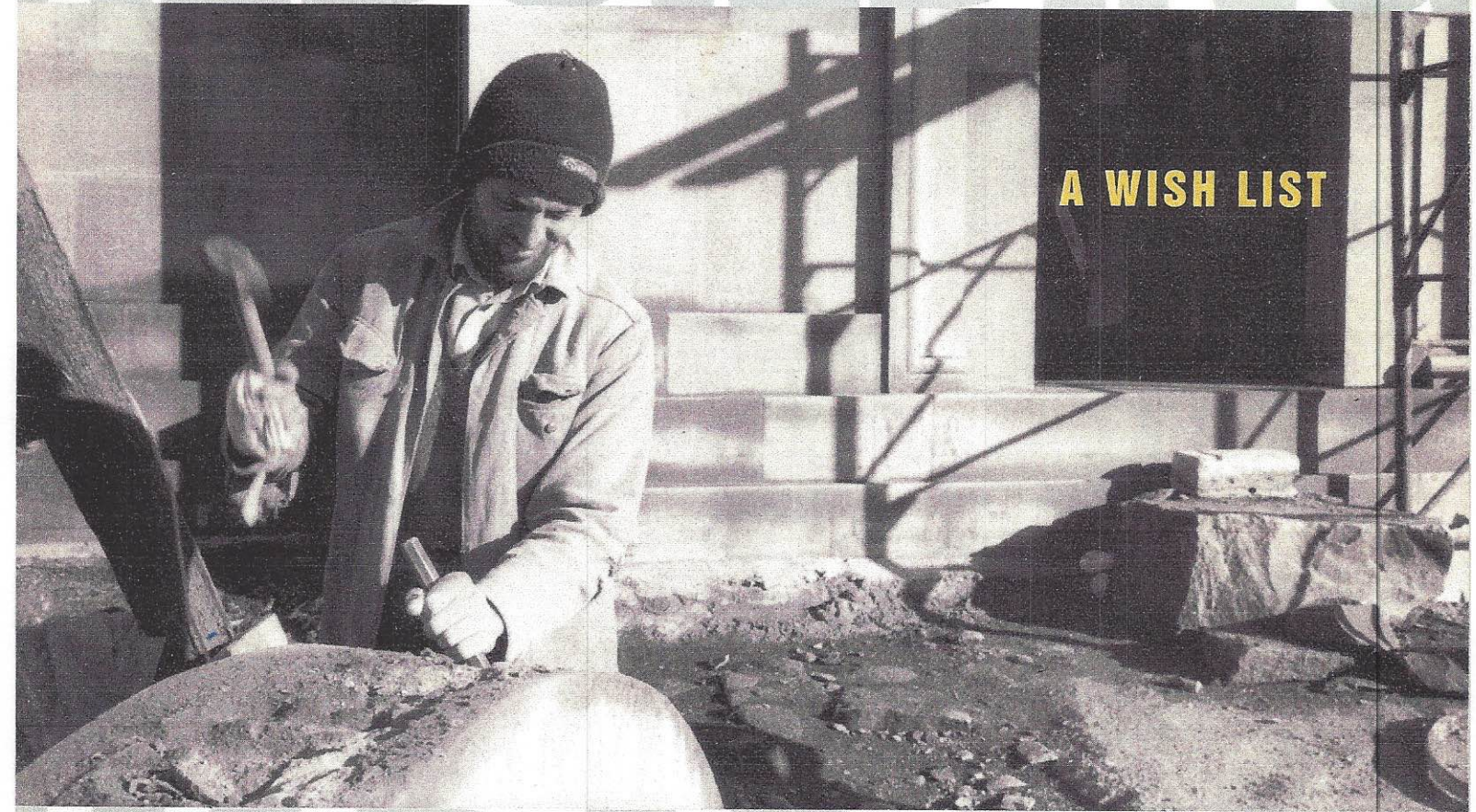


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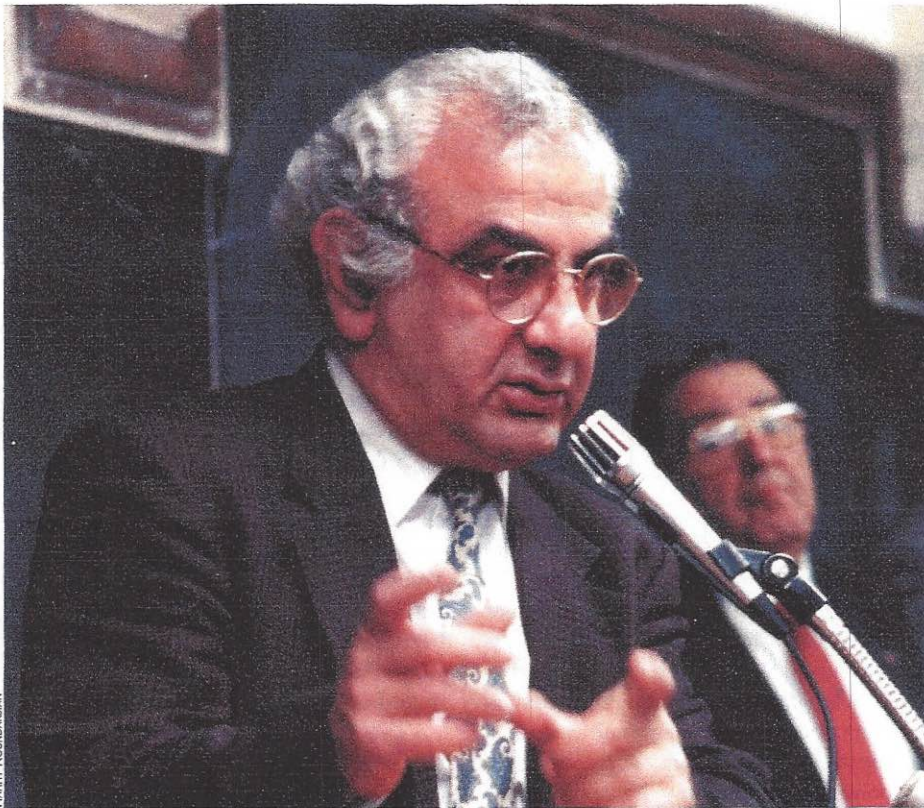
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# KARABAKH

Q&amp;A



HARRY KOUNDAKJIAN

# THE CHALLENGE OF STATEHOOD

Former Presidential Advisor Jirair Libaridian on the evolution of Armenian politics

Jirair Libaridian, a historian, was invited to Armenia in 1991 to serve in President Levon Ter Petrossian's administration. The co-founder and director of the Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, he had also been a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation until his resignation from that party in 1988.

Libaridian was the longest-serving Diasporan in the Ter Petrossian administration. During his seven years in office—first as Advisor, then as Senior Advisor to the President—he was criticized often. At the same time, he is credited with having a determining role in the development of Armenia's foreign policy. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the New York based EastWest Institute, Senior Consultant to IREX, and is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Grant to research and write a new book, *Anatomy of Conflict*, for which he has recently traveled to Yerevan, Baku, and other cities.

His first book was *The Karabagh File*, (Cambridge, the Zoryan Institute, 1988) which he edited at the beginning of the Democratic Movement in Armenia. His subsequent *Armenia at the Crossroads* (Cambridge, Blue Crane Books, 1991) was the first analysis of the pre-independence period, and the movement's leadership. In May, Blue Crane Books will issue *The Challenge of Statehood*, a look at the political thinking of Armenia and Armenians in the years following independence.

This is his first public interview since his resignation in September 1997.

**AIM:** It was rumored, at the time of your resignation, that your leaving was either a concession to the Russians, or to Armenia's domestic opposition. Was it?

**LIBARIDIAN:** Of course not. I went to Armenia for six months, ended up staying seven years. I had no political ambitions and disliked officialdom. Seven years was more than I could take. I resigned to be with my family again. The problem is that the truth, to be credible, must also be truth-like. In an environment, which believes in intrigues and power, I understand that my reason sounded too simple.

**Without fully developed academic or intellectual institutions, Armenia has no way to utilize the experiences of its former public servants. What have you been doing since your resignation?**

I returned to Boston and for the first few months did nothing. I watched old movies and listened to music. I bought books that had been published during the past seven years but could not read much. I gave papers at conferences at Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Berkeley, as well as Tbilisi, Tehran and Istanbul.

I also went to Yerevan, twice. The first time was just about a year ago, to turn in my resignation as Ambassador-at-Large, a position President Ter-Petrossian had asked me to retain when I resigned as Senior Adviser. That position had been given to me by a President; I returned it to the new President, Robert Kocharian in April 1998. Every President has the right to appoint his or her own Ambassadors, especially those expected to perform special missions. The new President and I discussed a number of issues. I told him that I was ready to assist if he needed me.

Between September and December of 1998 I wrote *The Challenge of Statehood*, which will be released soon.

**Your second trip to Yerevan was just a few weeks ago?**

Yes, in March. I participated in a workshop on sub-regionalism organized by the EastWest Institute. But I have also started work on my next book, *Anatomy of Conflict*, which will be completed by the

## ... for the first few months did nothing. I watched old movies and listened to music. I bought books that had been published during the past seven years. . .

end of 1999 and published, I hope, in 2000. That requires research in a number of cities, including Yerevan.

### **That was followed by a trip to Baku.**

*Anatomy of Conflict*, the book I started to work on now, will deal with the diplomatic aspects of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. I want to present the position of mediating countries and parties to the conflict as seen by them. My March 1999 trip was the first of many that will take me to all the capitals where policy was made, to speak to as many of the players as possible. Baku was just one of the capitals I went to or will be going to. I was also in Paris, Geneva, Vienna, and Bonn. Subsequently I will be going to Rome, Helsinki, Stockholm, Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara. My good friend Ambassador Kazimirov of the Russian Federation is now Ambassador in Costa Rica. I hope to see him as well.

### **Can you put the trip in the context of your earlier private meetings with Vafa Guluzade, who was then your Azerbaijani counterpart in President Aliiev's administration? You were criticized for those private meetings then, and some are criticizing you now for making this trip.**

I have heard some notes of discontent but have not seen specific arguments as to what was wrong with my visit to Baku, except that Azerbaijan has used it for propaganda purposes. For me this reflects a continuing obsession with propaganda as opposed to substance and a much-cherished confusion between public relations and clearly defined goals and positions. I have rarely paid attention to actions and statements made in Baku or elsewhere for domestic propaganda purposes. I understand fully that it has made some people uncomfortable. Discomfort is a necessary but not sufficient reason to criticize.

The important point is that as a matter of courtesy and out of respect for the position I had in the previous government, I had formally informed the Kocharian administra-

tion of my forthcoming trip to Baku, including its purpose, and expressed my readiness to meet with them while in Yerevan, before going to Baku. Had they seen a problem with my trip to Baku I am sure they would have raised it to me, as I have maintained cordial relations with the new administration.

You may also want to remember that I am not the first former official to visit capitals involved in the conflict. Whether it is our first Foreign Minister or the first Senior Adviser, many have visited such capitals and discussed the conflict with other governments, without representing the administration, often disagreeing with the then administration's position. Representatives of political parties, from Armenia or the Diaspora, have done the same for years, expressing their often passionate opposition to Yerevan's policies.

The difference is that I went to Baku as well. But for me, now or before, it is more important that Baku understand the Armenian position and concerns more than the others do. At the end, the Armenian side will have to convince Baku and live with Azerbaijan as a neighbor. Mediators come and go, propose solutions, and change proposals. The vital interests and perceptions of the parties to the conflict remain the critical aspects to a solution.

My visit was, as I stated, for the purpose of recording for my research the Azerbaijani policies as stated by its leaders. We discussed the conflict, of course. That discussion had nothing to do with the proposal of the mediators that is on hand. It could not have, since I did not know its contents. And I have enough experience not to make judgments on the basis of press statements.

As for my meetings with Guluzade during my tenure of office, it is possible that some disagreed with our methodology of achieving results in the negotiations. Whether the criticisms are justified or not will become clear when the full picture of the diplomatic process is presented. I, for one, continue to believe that they were extremely useful. The transformation of the

temporary cease-fire mediated by the Russian Federation in May 1994 into a permanent cease-fire in July and August of the same year was achieved because of my direct negotiations with Mr. Guluzade. Was that a bad thing?

Subsequent meetings were equally useful, I believe. But they require a fuller discussion and must wait a while longer.

### **Your role in particular, and the Karabakh negotiations in general, have been personalized, both by those who supported the process you were involved in and especially by those who did not.**

That is largely correct.

Given the seriousness of the matter being negotiated—war and peace—it was important for me to understand fully the position of other parties, the meaning behind their diplomatically couched statements, their real interests as opposed to their public posturing. I have developed personal relations with most of the negotiators and mediators. I have tried to understand their culture and politics. I have discussed with them their taste in music and literature, talked about their families, sometimes even met their families. That has produced a different kind of discourse, leading to more trust and credibility than conventional diplomacy permits. Getting to the core problem and eventually resolving them becomes easier. This is more true even of our main antagonists. None of this diminished the ability to present and defend the interests of the Armenian side. And, of course, none of this means that I am responsible for Mr. Guluzade's public statements, often made for domestic consumption, just as he is not to be held responsible for my statements or my unwillingness to respond to every one of his statements or every criticism that is leveled against me.

Secondly, it is easier for some people to personalize their opposition to policies, create dislike and distrust in the public toward those with whose policies they disagree. Some are better at dehumanizing the opponent than discussing alternative solutions to

the problem. Much of the criticism is based on ignorance of real processes and actual documents. It comes from a reflexive reaction to our policy of dealing with our antagonists, Turkey and Azerbaijan, directly—of seeing them as neighbors and future partners.

I have discussed this phenomenon in detail in my upcoming book, *The Challenge of Statehood*. The biggest casualty in recent events in Armenia, I argued, is the absence of a serious debate on the alternative solutions to the problem of Karabakh. Such a debate should have taken place particularly during the presidential campaign following President Ter-Petrosian's resignation. That debate did not take place; only a handful were privy to the details of the September 1997 proposal which engendered Ter-Petrosian's resignation, but just about everyone is sure it was bad. Right or wrong, the people, in whose name everyone speaks, were not part of that process.

Personalizing policies is a cheap, though possibly effective, method to avoid a rational debate.

solve problems, at least not the problems our people are facing in Armenia and Karabakh. The big battle, as I explain in my book, is between politics based on the search for normalcy for our people and the ideologized view of the world in the minds of some leaders who would like to see the Armenian people serve some "ideal," some higher vision, of course their own.

The personalization of politics, mutual dislikes and antagonisms between leaders, power struggles, constitute also problems.

Finally, the profession of journalism has not yet matured in Armenia. Checking allegations, double checking facts, separating fact from opinion are not yet the standard. You will remember that at some point Armenian newspapers, suddenly and conveniently reversing a long held tradition of considering Turkish newspapers unreliable, reprinted an item from a Turkish newspaper alleging that I had declared in Ankara that the genocide should be forgotten. Not a single reporter in Armenia or from the Diaspora called me to ask, "Jirair, did you really make such a statement in Turkey?" But many printed it.

1992, have not themselves done so or even raised the question when their leaders are now part of the new administration? How is it that in the fall of 1988 the three political parties of the Diaspora condemned the Karabakh Committee for advocating strikes in support of the rights of Karabakh—because it would harm Armenia's economy and relations with Moscow—yet at least two of them have now adopted a maximalist position and risk losing everything for that maximalist position? The list of such questions is very long.

The book covers a set of underlying beliefs and mental attitudes that attempt to explain such contradictions. It is also these attitudes that will distinguish between, on the one hand, leaders who are ready to take historical responsibility for the solution of the Karabakh problem based on a mutually acceptable compromise and, on the other hand, those who want everything and want to risk everything, with the certainty that they can blame someone else for any losses. I think we have had enough heroes and martyrs. The idea of politics is to avoid a situation where we can only

## The biggest casualty in recent events in Armenia is the absence of a serious debate on the alternative solutions to the problem of Karabakh.

**How do you explain the absence of any serious political or intellectual debate about these issues? A president gives a press conference about a major Armenian policy issue, Karabakh; he writes a lengthy article on this same subject, yet there is very little of substance said about the issues he raises.**

Political discourse in Armenia, but much more so in the Diaspora, has been ideologized. Extremist positions are accepted as the norm, debate consists of paying constant tribute to the altar of a simplistic ideology which consists of dividing the world into friends and enemies, and then of dehumanizing the enemy.

Especially in the Diaspora, there is an intellectual fear of approaching issues differently or offering alternative analyses. One is immediately branded as a villain or traitor, if one gives up the hatred of the "Turk" as a basis of ideology and policy. Ideologies, national or otherwise, do not

**Jirair, did you in Turkey say we want to forget the Genocide?**

Of course not. But I am glad you asked the question.

**Do you discuss Armenia's political culture or Ter Petrossian's changing fortunes in your book?**

*The Challenge of Statehood* is, essentially, a personal perspective on the political culture of Armenia, as well as of the Diaspora. It covers questions which have interested me for a long time, long before I worked in Armenia, and some that have arisen since independence. In fact, it examines the paradoxes and apparent contradictions in the positions of parties and leaders when faced with the Karabakh problem and independence. I ask, for example, how is it that political parties, which demanded Ter-Petrosian's resignation because he refused to recognize Karabakh's unilateral declaration of independence in the summer of

claim moral victories.

As for the second part of your question, I discuss in the book Ter-Petrosian in the context of his policies, not his personal career, except for the circumstances of his resignation. My reading of the latter varies from the conventional wisdom on that subject.

It would have been unrealistic for anyone to expect that a leader of a popular movement who becomes president of an independent country remain popular for very long. Remember, the country he was leading had just seceded from an empire whose economy had collapsed; it is a landlocked country that had to be part of a war to defend the rights of Karabakh Armenians and must live under a "no war, no peace" environment. Ter-Petrosian led the country practically for a decade. But a decade in Armenia under the circumstances was more like many decades worth of history. Remember how many volumes the historian

## ... historians have acted more like journalists and politicians, while political leaders have imposed their own view of history.

Richard Hovannisian had to write to cover the two and a half years of the First Republic. Ter-Petrosian governed that same nation for ten years. I think it will be easier to assess his legacy as time goes on. My book covers some of the issues and policies, but does not attempt to do that assessment.

### Which is considered legitimate in Armenia—political parties or the intelligentsia?

I could not speak of an intellectual class in Armenia. There are many bright thinkers and journalists, but no class has yet emerged from under the shadow of the former intelligentsia. In Armenia, the word intelligentsia is associated with an elite group from the past that has lost the privileged position it had under the Soviets without losing its sense of entitlement. While some have accepted independence and reforms and have tried to adjust to the new realities, others have spent their energies and visibility trying to regain their former privileges, all the while speaking in the name of the people.

Intellectuals are supposed to ask questions, others—politicians included—do not have the time or inclination to ask; to provide new perspectives on the past and the future, new insights on the present. Should there not have been, for example, a good look at the past 70 years and the impact of the system on the economy, the social structures and values, on the political culture and institutions that constitute the basis of today's society? Did Armenia and the Armenian people just appear on the map, out of nowhere? Is it feasible that corruption originated the morning after independence and with the Karabakh Committee, or even because of them? Are there competing visions of Armenia's identity and future?

The old intelligentsia has not taken on that task. The new one has yet to emerge, although, as I said, there are bright and courageous minds both from the old as well as the new generation.

As for political parties, I do not think the people of Armenia have any faith in them.

The absolute majority has little to do with parties, and the parties themselves have done little to dispel the mistrust people have developed toward the idea of "party" over the years as a result of Communist Party rule.

I might also add that while the Diaspora has a number of individuals who are intellectuals in the Western sense of the word, there is no Diasporan intelligentsia that raises and discusses, collectively, fundamental questions relating to the experience, the past, present and future of the Armenian people. Occasionally there are attempts to do so, but none has yet succeeded in maintaining a dialogue for long.

Unfortunately, also, historians have acted more like journalists and politicians, while political leaders have imposed their own view of history.

### Are there still possible permutations? Is it a musical chairs game? We had the Yerkrpahs split off from the ANM. Is it completely arbitrary?

There have been constant permutations since the Movement began in 1988. I was surprised to see the Karabakh Committee and the ANM stay united for as long as they did under very difficult circumstances. When some problems are resolved and others emerge, leaders develop their thinking further and disagree, particularly when they come to power. This is quite normal, even healthy. Alternative views and solutions are essential to a society and a state. It becomes dangerous when differences and decisions on choices are inspired by personal likes and dislikes, ambitions and vendettas.

Electoral coalitions are also not to be feared, as long as they are based on proximity of views and the ability of leaders to work together. I can see, for example, the Yerkrpahs working with Karen Demirjian's People's Party; I think they both oppose the privatization of major industries. I am not sure they would share views on the Karabakh conflict.

Many of the political parties lack recognizable leaders, while others only have leaders and no followers. In the personalized

political culture of Armenia both present problems and distort process and perception.

Armenia has too many born presidents; under different circumstances, that would have been a great blessing.

### Was *Le Monde* right? Was what happened in February 1998 a coup for nothing?

Possibly. I don't know yet. Then-Prime Minister Robert Kocharian believed that by doing certain things better or different than President Ter Petrossian he could generate economic growth significant enough to raise the standard of living of the citizens, without a peace treaty, or with a peace treaty that gave the Armenian side more than what was offered in September 1997.

The writer in *Le Monde* visited Yerevan after the new presidential elections and looked for signs of changes in domestic and foreign policy and could not find many.

The answer to your question will be given in time. Can President Kocharian prove his point? I happen to disagree with his assumptions and analysis. It is possible that he is right, but that needs to be proven. I do not believe that has been proven yet. I also do not believe one can wait forever to make a determination. I am certain of one thing: if President Kocharian is to prove that he is right and *Le Monde* is wrong, he must get all the support he can get, particularly from those who supported his action against Ter Petrossian and his election as president. Having advisers who sign petitions for his impeachment or demonstrate against him in the streets are not moves in the right direction. There is nothing wrong with disagreeing with the president, but to do so publicly while sitting in his office is a bizarre way to show support and a strange exercise in unity.

**Your book on Armenian political thinking will be released soon. What can you tell us about the next book?**

*The Challenge of Statehood* will be released in English soon. It is also being translated into other languages, including Armenian and French.

I am now deeply involved in the research for my next book, for which I traveled recently to Yerevan, Baku and elsewhere. As I said earlier, it is called *Anatomy of Conflict: Nagorno Karabakh and the New World Order*. I want to place the conflict in its international context. In this book I will first trace the transformation of the conflict over the past ten years from a local issue into an internationally significant problem. The second part will cover the various venues for negotiations, different methodologies used during mediations, and the role of countries and international organizations.

**What are your plans for the long term? Do you want a teaching position in Armenian studies?**

I am not sure I would like to return to a university position involving full time teaching. That may be unfair not only to me but also to the students. I have been

disconnected from teaching for so long. I do not mind teaching a course or two, just as a way to compel myself to think on subjects in an organized setting.

It is time for younger scholars to take their place. I am gratified that a young scholar got the position at Tufts University's newly-established Armenian

## Is it feasible that corruption originated the morning after independence?

Studies Chair. A fully deserving one at that. I believe Ina Baghdiantz McCabe will make a great contribution to the study of Armenian history from a new angle. I was also quite happy to see another young scholar, Stephanie Platz, appointed to the

University of Michigan's Alex Manoogian Chair in Modern Armenian History. I think anthropology, social psychology, economics, and political science can bring new perspectives to Armenian studies, perspectives which might explain far better what has happened and what is happening today than traditional history, particularly non-critical and politicized history as is often the case. The focus on history was understandable when we were facing the problems of legitimation of Armenian identity.

We do not have that problem today. Armenian history has been legitimized and Armenia is an independent state. With all of its problems and challenges, in fact in its reality, it is a better source of identity than abstracted, ideologized, and idealized history. The problem now is to legitimize and rejuvenate Armenian studies in general, so that it can start addressing contemporary issues as well and do so in a manner that is relevant to the social sciences.

As for me, in 1999 I will finish my new book and work closely with IREX and the EastWest Institute on regional projects. The rest I will see.



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