

Interview With Prof. Jirair Libaridian on the Occasion of the 95th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide “A Depopulated Armenia Would Have Difficulty Being a Viable Country. Large Scale Emigration is the Greatest Threat to Armenia’s Future”

Should we continue expanding our resources to pursue worldwide recognition of the Armenian Genocide or should our priorities change?

The drive behind the campaign for the recognition of the Genocide is an understandable reflex, especially given the still dominant official position of the Turkish state, the denial of the Genocide. But we should realize that we are now engaged in a tug of war with that state: we push, and as a reaction they push; they push, and then we push harder.

While engaged in this battle, we should think, indeed, if this is the best and only way to proceed in the future. We have a tendency to confuse our collective and existential needs to press in this campaign with strategic thinking. We also have a tendency to forget that just as the Armenian Question before the WWI, when we enter the international arena with our campaign, it is not us who determine the character and use of that campaign, or even the outcome; rather, it is those from whom we beg that they recognize our genocide.

On a personal level, I must confess that I am repulsed by the situation in which we find ourselves: we were the victims, and now we are the beggars, constantly placing ourselves in the role of the victim, constantly at the mercy of forces and games beyond our control, constantly raising our hopes and being frustrated, dependent on the use of one word by a president or a prime minister or a committee or a commission. We act as if we don't have any other value outside the role of the victim, which must be consecrated by someone else, while that someone else has his/her own agenda. We don't seem to have an autonomous thought process.

I would not want to translate my personal feelings into policy but I would also not want to see community policy on reflexive reactions. With all my respect and support for President Obama, should I care about what he says and should my whole community life and agenda be based on whether he uses the word Genocide or not? Should I design my plans on where to place my energies and resources around the annual battle, which seems to repeat itself, like a musical tune with many variations?

Is it wise and productive to build identity around the theme of victimization and a self-image that depends on what others think of us? Is that a good agenda for healthy Diaspora communities? Is that enough to give to our new generations?

Was what we did 40, 30 or 20 years ago right? And if it was, is it still wise to continue doing the same thing now? The same way? Under what circumstances should we change tactics or strategy?

I would not offer any conclusions here, but I would make one recommendation: there has to be a serious public and rational discussion



on this question, and the opportunity costs related to it, especially among those who take this approach of Genocide recognition campaign as the basic strategic path for granted and, after some 40 years, have never questioned or assessed it properly. Finally, I do not know and I have not seen reliable studies as to how much these efforts cost us, in terms of financial, human and other resources nor, for that matter, have I seen any serious discussion of any of the negative side effects of such campaigns, and I can think of a few.

The last 15 years, at least, have indicated for those who wish to see it, that there are other strategies available that could be used instead of, or in tandem with, the current one. But for that to happen, we must have leaders of organizations who are willing to be self-critical and see beyond the confines of their organizational interests.

Should our primary concern be Armenia or the welfare of the Diaspora and the future generations?

It does not seem to me that we need to counterpoise one to the other. It is clear that with an independent Armenia we have a different kind of Diaspora than without it. I have stated before, and still believe, that what Armenia has given us is much more than we can repay in any form. The new generation of Armenians now has a direct and a more wholesome sense of its identity, a more dynamic one, than they did without it.

The two entities are different—and the Diaspora itself represents a whole spectrum of units and should not be seen as a single one—but are mutually dependent in a number of ways. We must recognize and respect the differences as well as the dependencies.

There are, of course, those in the Diaspora who want to care about Armenia from a distance and prefer to focus on Diaspora institutions. And they should be left alone to do so. But it is clear that even they and their institutions, regardless of their preferences and approaches, are and will be affected by whatever happens in and to Armenia, by the degree of support it gets from the other elements in the Diaspora, and the place the homeland has in the minds and

hearts of these other elements.

What are the limits of the Diaspora’s involvement in shaping Armenia’s policy?

The short answer to your question is a question: Which Diaspora do you have in mind?

Otherwise, there are severe limits, obviously.

The first is a structural one: While Armenia has a leader who can, at least formally, speak in the name of Armenia and can certainly implement policy in the name of the country, the Diaspora has a thousand leaders and there is no single person or institution that can speak on behalf of a Diaspora.

I remember a day when I was working in Armenia, when representatives of a number of Diasporan groups met with president Ter-Petrosian, separately, and each urged a certain policy on a particular issue. Each spoke in the name of the whole Diaspora, each thought they best embodied the goals and values and concerns of that Diaspora. And, of course, what one had to say was in conflict with what the next group recommended. At the end, Ter-Petrosian conveyed the following logic to these groups: when the Diaspora has a leader who can sit across the president of Armenia and say with confidence that he or she represents the Diaspora without being contradicted by another because that person has been selected through a process or can impose its will on the others, then it is possible to think of a Diaspora opinion which the president of Armenia would have to consider, at the least.

What, for example, is the position of the Diaspora, taken as a single unit, regarding the Protocols Armenia signed with Turkey last year? A number of organizations, some with mass membership, supported it. Others opposed it. So which one represents the position of the Diaspora? It is obviously not all that clear that all members of all the organizations that supported the protocols agreed with their leadership; it is equally questionable that all members of those who opposed the protocols agreed with their leadership.

The second limitation is of an organic nature: the three traditional Armenian political parties have established themselves in Armenia, not without much success or popular support, I would say, and have become parties in Armenia, taking their basic agendas with them while keeping their diasporan structures intact. In addition, major organizations such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenian Assembly of America, and the Armenian Missionary Association have been functioning in Armenia for a long time and, in some respects, have acquired strong sensibilities for the realities in Armenia. What should we consider these parties and organizations at this point, after 20 years: strictly diasporan?

On the other hand, we have a large number of citizens of Armenia

who have become diasporans but have not integrated in the traditional diasporan organizations, and who have and act on very different sensibilities and perspectives. Should we consider these large groups part of the Diaspora? And, which Diaspora?

I can go on with other limitations—political, cultural—but the above should give you some idea.

What do these characteristics say about the Diaspora and what are the implications of this analysis? The answers to these questions are complex and disconcerting, but this is not the place to develop them.

What would the effects of a weak and depopulated Armenia be on Armenians and the Diaspora?

Since this is the 95th anniversary of the Genocide, I find it only proper to raise a question that all of us, but especially those who want to speak in the name of the Armenian people in Armenia or in the Diaspora, should consider, a question that is almost an answer to your question.

How was the Genocide in 1915 possible, technically speaking?

We discuss the horrors of the Genocide, we discuss the immorality and illegality of the Genocide, we have even started looking at the historical reasons for the Genocide beyond the useless and dangerous—though for some simple and comforting—notion that Turks were placed on earth to kill Armenians and Armenians were there to be killed by Turks.

You simply cannot kill a people just because you want to and you find yourself a good reason to do so. You must also have the capability to do it. Being a government gives you an advantage but it is not sufficient. If you represent a certain number on your land, you can resist and make it harder or impossible for a government to eliminate you. And eliminate you as radically as the CUP did in 1915-1917.

There were spots where we resisted, sometimes with good results. Imagine if we had five million Armenians in Western Armenia instead of the two or so million by the best estimates, including Armenians in some other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

Don't you think that the chances of successfully resisting such a policy by the government would have been far greater?

More importantly, don't you think that the CUP government might have thought twice before determining that the solution to the Armenian Question is the effective elimination of the Armenian element from Anatolia or the Eastern provinces or Western Armenia, whatever you want to call the region?

The population of Armenia during the Bagratuni period was estimated to be around one million people, mostly Armenian and mostly in what would become Western Armenia. And why is it that England or other parts

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of the world that had roughly the same population in the same century, ended up with many, many millions more but not Western Armenia. There were massacres, sure, during the Seljuk and Mongol periods; there were also conversions. But for the most part things had settled down by the 17th century. Western Armenia probably lost more Armenians after that date and before the Genocide.

The reason for the diminished population was emigration due to economic conditions, the occasionally insecure environment, and the appeal of other places, which were imagined as providing better answers to these problems. In many respects this last phenomenon was somewhat universal. But while other countries and peoples may have been able to afford the loss of population without losing much strategically, we were not in that position: we could not afford it.

We need to look at two factors when considering this history: The focus of the Armenian political parties—first the Hnchakians and then the Dashnaksutyune—during their founding days until WWI on the thin-

ning of the Armenian population and the dangers they saw in that process. Second, anyone interested in this subject should read Fuat Dundar's book that will be released this month on the importance of the absolute and relative numbers of Armenians in the region in the thinking of Ottoman and Young Turk leaders.

A weak Armenia is most vulnerable, of course, in more ways than one; particularly if that Armenia has not settled its problems with all its neighbors. A depopulated Armenia would have difficulty being a viable country. You can have a viable country with a vibrant society that preserves the best of its past and is capable of participating in progress and development and knows how to handle change; or, an Armenia that can serve as a theme park for visitors from the Diaspora. There is a relationship between numbers and security, numbers and development, numbers and quality, numbers and the tax base. In this respect, the failure to resolve Armenia's problems with its neighbors remains, in my mind, the main reason for the large scale emigration, and large scale emigration is the greatest threat to Armenia's future.