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# Diaspora: Process and Program

G. Jirair Libaridian

The word «Diaspora», applied to the current Armenian condition outside Soviet Armenia conceals far more than it reveals. «Diaspora» certainly describes a historically evolved and geographically defined demographic reality. Yet in current thinking it has come to represent an entity abstracted not only from the larger societies within which Armenian communities exist but also from the particular sociological conditions which characterize these communities. The underlying, widely held assumption that the process of diaspora formation was completed by the original expulsion of Armenians from their fatherland belies the continuing movement of large numbers from one continent to another. Similarly, the apocalyptic interpretation of the Armenian past and the future of the Diaspora has impaired our ability and willingness to note the stratification within and differentiation between communities and the crucial ramifications these have for the culture produced in the Diaspora today.

The purpose of this paper is to share some preliminary comments on the environment in which Armenian communities have traditionally attempted to deal with the difficult problem of a Diasporan culture and establish the necessity of developing an alternative framework of cultural identification.

Since the 1920s and increasingly since World War II a

movement of Armenians less traumatic but no less massive has taken place from Eastern European and Near Eastern countries to Western Europe and the Americas. It might appear at first — and this is often argued — that these resettlements are caused by unusual political circumstances. But it is clear that changes of régimes, civil wars and regional conflicts have only speeded up a process that existed regardless of upheavals. To a limited extent this follows the patterns set at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries in the Ottoman and Russian empires where the slow process of export of unused labor and manpower turned into panicky outflow during massacres.

More often than not these secondary migrations have occurred from those countries which during the last three decades moved from capitalistic or precapitalistic economies to varying degrees and forms of socialistic systems. The emigration of whole Eastern European communities to the U.S. and Canada, of large numbers from Iraq, Egypt and Syria to Lebanon and North America, of still more from Ethiopia to Rhodesia and South Africa constitute a sizable portion of these resettlements. Nonetheless the explanation cannot be generalized since it would fail to explain the steady flow of Iranian and Lebanese Armenians to Western countries.

One comprehensive explanation for these resettlements will be attempted below. Suffice it to state at this point that the extent and tenor of these migrations make it impossible to deal with the Diaspora as a completed process, underscore the problematic nature of the future of remaining communities, present the necessity of understanding more thoroughly the relationship — cultural and political — of these communities with local governments and cultures and cast serious doubts on the relevance of Armenianness — as defined by the traditional institutions — to those who decide to leave these presumed bastions of Diasporan survival.

These demographic adjustments can hardly be ascribed to national priorities and are more readily understood in terms of the larger forces at play in changing societies and the perceptions Armenians have evolved of them. Clearly, Armenian communities which together constitute the Diaspora exist in regions of the world which are at different stages of development. For the purposes of developing the argument I shall divide the Diaspora into two sets of communities: the Near East (Iran, the Arab countries) and the West (Europe and North America). Such a division is justified when the direction of the demographic changes is taken into consideration.

That the Near Eastern Armenian communities constituted the best hope for the preservation of Armenian identity has been taken for granted since *hayababbanum* became the slogan for the Diaspora. To the present day the region counts the largest number of Armenians outside the Armenian SSR. Political parties, one Catholicosate and a large number of other organizations are headquartered there. The area counts more schools, churches and centers, more newspapers, publications and cultural activities than any other in the Diaspora.

The early success of these communities in erecting a cultural infrastructure similar to the one that had evolved in the Ottoman empire was due to a large degree to the extra-territorial rights of civil and religious administration often granted to these Armenian communities by the mandated Arab states, heirs to that empire. The religious and ethnic factor was recognized as a legitimate, even legal, basis for association with the state, the most extreme case being Lebanon.

Moreover, the privileged position Near Eastern communities claimed was reinforced by the knowledge of language and history which emigrants from this area to the West displayed in their new communities. The latter, faced with impossible odds of survival, were only too willing to abdicate that responsibility placing squarely on the shoulders of the first the burden of national survival although they did not give up their positions of leadership in existing organizations to successive waves of newcomers without a struggle. But outside of antagonisms arising out of differences in degrees of acculturation the essential paradox in the situation — that of immigrants claiming to place priority of survival over all other considerations but leaving havens of Armenianism for places where assimilation was regarded inevitable — went unnoticed.

It is, furthermore, remarkable that the myth of the cultural viability of Near Eastern communities has survived the disintegration of most communities there. Armenians in Egypt, Iraq represent mere shadows of their former selves; in Syria they have been reduced to near anonymity. One might also add that the future of Armenians in Turkey as a community is as bleak as ever. In fact, the only two countries which can approximate the projected images of durability are Iran and Lebanon. Yet, the first could very well be on the throes of a radical transformation and the second faces the impossibility of overcoming the causes of its most recent civil war.

What constituted the strength of once active communities in the Near East was in fact the cause for their demise. The development of an Armenian cultural identity within the framework of a medieval value system such as the Ottoman *millet* structure became a tenuous proposition indeed when domestic and international developments forced these states to face the challenge of modernization. The first prerequisite of modernization being the institution of a viable state that can transcend — by force or by legalisms — particular allegiances and privileges, it was only a question of time before the highly visible isolation of Armenian communities from the larger society would become a threat to governments which sought integration and homogeneity — two characteristics which in Western societies had evolved gradually through urbanization, industrialization and liberal democratic political systems.

The apparent successes of the communities in Iran and Lebanon rather confirm the tenuous nature of their position. In Iran, the government attempts economic modernization without its political or social concomitants. A threatened Shah seeks support among minorities such as the Armenians who do not claim any share in the political order but who are led by elements benefitting from an economic expansion. In Lebanon it is the absence of any concept of modern statehood that allows Armenians a temporary advantage in leading a seemingly autonomous life.

These comments are not aimed at making predictions. As uncertain as the future of the Near East is, communities can exist, preserve their language and even traditional institutions for a long time to come. Rather these comments are aimed at reaching the right questions regarding the content of the value system that can be produced under these circumstances and the relevance these communities can have for the Diaspora or for Armenian culture in general.

Although no empirical evidence exists as yet, it is, I believe, safe to assert that beyond the arduous process of building new physical and institutional structures for the resettled communities, it was the Armenian middle and upper classes that formulated the economic, cultural and social outlook of the refugee masses. Armenians in commerce, manufacturing and the professions, who benefitted from favorable policies local privileged classes and imperialist rule, also led the Armenian communities, defined their goals and attitudes toward political and economic changes. Furthermore, particularly in the Near East, this Armenian middle class, along with those of other minorities such as the Greek and Jewish elements — held an unproportionately large and hence visible, share of the small middle classes in these developing countries. There were two consequences for this interlocking leadership. First, Armenian political thought and cultural activity returned to a conservative if not reactionary mold. Survival as a nation was equated to preservation of past institutions and symbols devoid of any revolutionary content; relations of the Armenian community with the larger society and the government were reduced to patterns aimed at the preservation of the privileged positions of the upper classes. As had occurred in Istanbul, Izmir and to some extent Tiflis, the Armenian bourgeoisie that lacked its own land secured its economic survival by delivering to reactio-

nary régimes the allegiance of the Armenian masses they led. The Shah's donation of a sporting field, the greek colonels' donation of piece of real estate for the purpose of building a church to the Armenian communities, and the open welcome accorded by the South African government to Armenian refugees from Lebanon and Ethiopia are actions difficult to construe under any other light.

Secondly, emigration became a tacit national policy for Armenians when the privileged position of the Armenian bourgeoisie was undermined by changes in economic systems. The price for privileges and the cost of the illusion of national survival had been the total alienation of Armenians from the problems and aspirations of the larger society. Under these circumstances emigration to «free» countries could be justified in national ideological terminology — such as escaping national, ethnic, religious, etc., persecution — while the destination could seldom satisfy an Armenian concerned with cultural survival, even though Western societies do not need coercive methods to integrate and co-opt even the newest of immigrants.

The differences in the stages and forms of political and economic development between the Near East and Western countries are all too obvious to need any amplification here. These highly industrialized and urbanized societies provide avenues for integration and/or assimilation which are both pervasive and easy. Armenians here are economically integrated, being too small and possibly too late to acquire any particular role beyond the proportion of their numbers. Political and cultural integration depend largely on time. Traditional institutions provide an informal and voluntary form of identification. The cultural affinity which Armenians have felt toward Western culture in general facilitates the process of assimilation.

Here, too, it is a contented bourgeoisie or an aspiring petty bourgeoisie which sets the patterns of cultural and political thought. Ritualized activities — religious, cultural and even political — compensate for the effort to understand rapid changes in behavior and mentality which are pushed to the subconscious and thus help alleviate the pain from loss of control over their national identity.

One question that emerges immediately is what values if any, do the Near Eastern communities have to offer to those faced with immediate loss of identity? There are, of

course, some similarities. As in the Near East, although for different reasons, millionnaires seem to be the most sought-after representatives of Armenian interests. The wealthy elements are also proclaimed the benefactors of the nation with the smallest crumbs thrown at the community. In both environments values propagated within the community institutions are those classes which have the least to be discontented.

Then there are the differences which cannot be bridged by symbols and rituals. The Near Eastern communities are still carrying the burden of the past since they are forced to live with it daily. In Western societies Armenians have reduced Armenian people's historical experience to the simple aspiration to live in peace and prosperity that is offered in the West. The Near Eastern Armenian has moralized and idealized enough to hope for a two thousand year Diasporan existence until a new resurrection — following the example of the Jewish people. The Western Armenian is too conscious of change and time to follow that example; but having cut off the possibility of changing Armenian values, he is resigned to their defeat at the hands of a liberal society. Finally, while the Near Eastern societies have accepted their political impotence, those in the West have started going through the motions of the ultimate co-optation — the high art of lobbying.

Ultimately, however, both cultures are irrelevant. If nothing else, the continuing pattern of resettlement should indicate that even those most prone to adopting the slogan of *bayababbanum* are rejecting it by their feet. And the more they have rejected it, the more the upholders of the creed have evangelized. More importantly, the two dominant groups of communities with their different patterns of development yet identical concept of the meaning and content of an Armenian identity or culture have failed to account for a deeper meaning of the Armenian past and the basic realities of modern society.

There remains, I believe, the task of exploring the possibilities of alternative frames of thought. To understand the past in order to transcend it, to explore the present in order that we may live with it and, finally, to develop our own, more humanistic perspective in order that we escape the forbidding contours of an exclusive Armenianism and avoid total irrelevance should be our next assignment.