

**“Diaspora and Democracy:
The Diaspora’s Response to National Movements in Armenia”**

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1. Beginnings and Foundations

The Diaspora of the Armenians is arguably the only one of its kind. In the first place, it has existed for a millennium. Secondly, Diaspora Armenians, especially their commerce and European education, played an instrumental role in what we today consider to be the Armenian national liberation movement(s) of the 19th and 20th centuries. It has also undergone great transformations; the *Spyurk* is not merely a collection of dispersed communities -- “it is an entity in its own right,” and it has its own history.¹ Ultimately, however, the most important and unique feature related to the Diaspora has nothing to do with it. While the Jewish Diaspora is older and arguably more (often exclusively) relevant to Jewish and Israeli history, it has not had a traditional ‘homeland’ continuously populated by co-ethnics. Indeed, there has been an uninterrupted Armenian presence in the Caucasus and Anatolia since at least the 6th century B.C., and themes of exile have been a dominant aspect of the Armenian narrative since the Mongol invasions of the 11th and 12th centuries.

This is not to say that the nature of the Diaspora, its views on the homeland, and the homeland’s views of it, have remained static. In fact, just the opposite has occurred. The earliest Diaspora Armenians, for example, more often left Armenia pursuing lucrative business interests and intellectual adventures than as a matter of necessity. By contrast, the Armenian Diaspora of today is largely made up of the descendants of Armenians who were forced out of their historic

¹ Panossian, R. (1998). The Armenians: Conflicting Identities and the Politics of Division. In N. J. M. Charles King (Ed.), *Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union* (pp. 240). Boulder: Westview Press, p. 79.

homes during World War I. The pre-1915 Diaspora was also considerably smaller than the one today. It is important to note that the term “Diaspora” (at least in the Armenian case) does not necessarily refer to Armenians living outside of their historic homeland. The Cilician Kingdom, for example, was founded and established outside of historic Armenia, yet it is not considered to be a ‘Diaspora’ kingdom. Furthermore, the extremely influential Armenians that hovered towards major administrative cities in their respective empires (i.e. Constantinople, Tiflis, etc.), although living outside of historic Armenia, were not necessarily Diaspora communities, but extensions of the homeland. Likewise, today, even though Armenians living in the former Soviet/Russian space are arguably more influential in Armenia and rival Diaspora communities from the Middle East and the West in terms of size and numbers, they have been left out of the traditional (mostly western Armenian) Diaspora narrative.² The same can be said of recent émigrés from Armenia to the United States and Western Europe. Although few generalizations can be made about such a diverse group of people, it is clear by now that the genocide survivors and their descendants have almost exclusively dominated the Diaspora’s narrative – that is, the subjective perception of history and current events.³

Yet even the traditional Diaspora that rose out of the ashes of the Armenian genocide has undergone a major transformation in a relatively short period. First, the rise of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation as the major Diaspora

² Ibid.

³ For a more thorough and detailed examination of the development of Armenian national identity as a whole, see Panossian, R. (2006). *The Armenians : from kings and priests to merchants and commissars*. New York: Columbia University Press.

organization is an important yet often overlooked process. Essentially, a political party that was founded in Tiflis in the 19th century, governed and lead by a largely eastern Armenian republic in the homeland, superimposed its ideology, structures, and history on a post-genocide, almost exclusively western Armenian Diaspora. This will have drastic consequences on Armenia-Diaspora relations in the years to come because the agenda of the government of Armenia in 1918 (i.e. the agenda of the A.R.F.) found an audience and political home, not in the homeland from where it came, but in the Diaspora that it found itself in. Alternatively, until the mid 1960s, much of this political capital was targeted not towards genocide recognition or even Turkey, but against the Soviet Union. With the genocide memorial movement in Armenia, and the coming of age of the genocide survivors' children, the most powerful and outspoken forces in the Diaspora (including nationalistic, academic, and political ones) shifted their emphasis from combating the Soviet Union to combating Turkey and the denial of the Armenian genocide. Since then, not much has changed in the Diaspora's structure, competing loyalties, and perception of identity – despite the fact that there is an independent Armenia. Instead, the Diaspora has tackled and viewed Armenian independence within the same perspective it had in Sarkis Atamian's *The Armenian Community* (itself a byproduct of the politics it tried to analyze).⁴ This has severely restricted the Diaspora's own capabilities. Instead of adapting to the new post-1991 realities, it has often rewritten very recent history to preserve and present the new realities within the old narrative. Thus, in

⁴ Atamian, S. (1955). *The Armenian Community: The Historical Development of a Social and Ideological Conflict*. New York: Philosophical Library.

analyzing the most recent events and trends related to Diaspora-Armenia relations, it is important to remember that some of these aspects of the Diaspora were not the case before 1915, and some that are today will not be so in the near future.

2. Boghos Nubar Pasha's Precedence

In 1919, a newly, democratically elected government in Armenia assembled a bipartisan delegation for the Paris Peace Conference. Avetis Aharonian, a well-known poet lead the delegation. Upon arriving in Paris, he discovered the presence of another Armenian deputation -- one lead by the token Diaspora Armenian, Boghos Nubar Pasha. As the son of a prominent Egyptian politician, Boghos Nubar had vast sums of wealth and prestige amongst European elites. He was, however, ultimately self-appointed – acting more out of the celebrity-prominence his father's name and wealth could offer, and less from any real democratic or popular mandate. Despite this obvious and glaring lack of legitimacy, however, Boghos Nubar considered Aharonian's delegation to be incompetent and unrepresentative at best, and treacherous at worst.⁵ But he was out of touch and grossly misinformed about the geopolitical and military situation in Anatolia and the Caucasus. And his great assumption that the Europeans were interested in keeping Armenia, let alone giving it borders stretching from Baku to Cilicia, as a viable state, reeked of amateur diplomacy. Even a brief review of the time period reveals that Aharonian and the *Dashnak* government in Yerevan were not limited by imagination and certainly not

⁵ Hovannisian, R. G. (1971). *The Republic of Armenia: The First Year, 1918-1919 (Vol. 1)*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 259.

patriotism, but by financial and military capabilities. This is not to say that Nubar Pasha's motives were disingenuous or half-hearted – Nubar Pasha had served western Armenia diligently and will become the future founder of the AGBU – perhaps the Diaspora's greatest patron of Armenian culture. Instead, they were destructive and unnecessary. Nevertheless, despite having overpowered and forced Aharonian to yield, he was not allowed to be a signatory in the final treaty. Aharonian's journal, upon hearing the news, depicts Nubar as a man in a state of depression.⁶ While highly anecdotal and personal in nature, the precarious situation the Armenians found themselves in is extremely revealing. Eventually, Boghos Nubar Pasha's actions and views on the "Araratian republic," eastern Armenians, and the 'Armenianess' of what will soon be the Armenian Diaspora will be a precedent that continuously repeats itself, often in a contradictory fashion. Of course, after the rise of the A.R.F. in the Diaspora, Armenians in the *Spyurk* will come to champion the cause of Avetis Aharonian, and largely dismiss Boghos Nubar Pasha's vision of a grand Armenian empire. It will not, however, disown him. The Diaspora's relationship with Armenia is immortalized in the struggle between Boghos Nubar Pasha and Avetis Aharonian. Much of the tension that exists today between the two is the same tension that filled the hallways of Nubar Pasha's and Aharonian's hotels in Paris.

3. 'Miatsum'

Between 1988 and 1990, when the people of Armenia began their road to

⁶ Aharonian, A. (1962b). From Sardarapt to Sevres and Lausanne (A Political Diary). *The Armenian Review*, 15, 54-66.

independence, the Diaspora's response was hesitant and in one very important case, outright oppositional. The three main parties, the *Hnchaks*, *Ramgavars*, and *Dashnaks*, responded to the mass demonstrations in Yerevan with skepticism and caution. Their hesitance was in direct contrast to the powerful and popular nationalistic uproar in Armenia and Artsakh. While the leaders of the Kharabagh Committee were in jail, the three parties joined together in a press release, calling on their "valiant brethren in Armenia and Kharabagh to forgo such extreme acts...and radical calls...which unsettle the law and order of the public life in the homeland..."⁷ By 1991, the *Hnchaks* and *Ramgavars* threw their meager, yet highly symbolic weight behind the 'miatsum' movement. In perhaps one of the greatest ironies of Armenian history, the party that had long championed independence and irredentism, the A.R.F., remained opposed to the idea of independence – even after 1991: "Independence was not timely, the party argued; it was not a prudent, move, it was 'thrown' at Armenia and not won."⁸ As was the case in 1919, the most well organized and outspoken Diaspora personalities/organizations remained opposed to the popular movement in Armenia and its leadership.

Over a short period of time, however, much as they left out Boghos Nubar Pasha's role in the Paris Peace Conference, the Diaspora will write out this bizarre behavior from their own narrative. In 2008, when the population organized itself to put former Levon Ter-Petrosyan back in power, the Diaspora fought back against the popular movement. While there are, of course, more complex reasons

⁷ Libardian, G. J. (1999). *The Challenge of Statehood: Armenian Political Thinkings Since Independence*. Cambridge: Blue Crane Books, p. 138.

⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

and explanations for Opposition to widely popular movements in Armenia, it seems, has become the norm rather than the exception. While identifying and explaining the psychological or ideological reasoning behind the Diaspora's erratic behavior are outside of the limitations of this paper, it is becoming increasingly clear that the people of Armenia, especially during popular movements, are marginalized and, in the Diaspora's eyes, portrayed as too unrepresentative of the Armenian people. The movement's leaders being to embody the 'unArmenianess' of the Caucasian eastern Armenian – treacherous in the case of Avetis Aharonian, and pro-Turkish/Jewish in the case of Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Even prominent military figures like Vazgen Sarkisian are written out of history textbooks while Diaspora *fidayis* like Monte Melkonian, although ultimately not as instrumental in the war effort as him, become the great heroes of the war. It is indeed revealing to note that Vazgen Sarkisian's grave reads "*Sparapet Hayots*" (the military title of Vartan Mamikonian), yet the vast majority of Diaspora Armenians, even those actively engaged in the community, do not know his name.

4. Armenia-Turkey Protocols and the re-victimization of the Diaspora

The announcement of the Armenia-Turkey protocols, although not a national movement, offer us a glimpse into the Diaspora psyche. The initial response (and still the organized Diaspora's most consistent argument) is that, if for no other reason, the Armenian government has no *right* to sign the protocols

simply because the Diaspora opposes it.⁹ Of course, this is a hypocritical argument to make considering the Diaspora, both as a national entity, and as an organized political institution, has continuously opposed the wishes and objectives of the people of Armenia. Nobody in the Diaspora, for example, ever made the argument that *because the people of Armenia support it, the Diaspora should follow* -- even when they are movements and initiatives they have supported in the past (i.e. A.R.F.'s position in 1988).¹⁰ Another widely held view is that the protocols are defeatist, they betray the 'Armenian cause,' and they are going to undo the great work the Diaspora has done for it.¹¹ Of course, these can each be argued on their own merits. But it is still an unusual response considering every point in the protocols the Diaspora opposes (i.e. recognition of current borders, establishment of historical commission) has been explicitly enacted by the previous Kocharyan administration. Some organizations like the Armenian National Committee of America, for example, assert that Diaspora Armenians make up the larger portion of the Armenian nation as a whole, and because of this, are entitled to have some sort of veto power over Yerevan policies as far reaching as the protocols. These sentiments and accusations have at their core the same implications and allegations that Boghos Nubar Pasha tried to make in 1919: the Caucasian Armenians are not only a small sample of the

⁹ Armenian National Committee of America. (2009). The ANCA's point by point analysis of the Turkey-Armenia Protocols. 2010, from http://www.anca.org/assets/pdf/misc/protocols_explained.pdf

¹⁰ This is of course a generalization. However, such an argument has yet to win the hearts and minds of Armenian organizations, or even, arguably, a considerable portion of the community at large.

¹¹ Thomassian, V. (2010). To the Community: Our Message Has Been Made. 2010, from <http://www.stoptheprotocols.com/2009/10/10/to-the-community-our-message-has-been-made/>

Armenian world, but they are also defeatist, they ask for “too little,” and they are generally unpatriotic. Most of the Diaspora’s (often contradictory) behavior has its roots in Boghos Nubar Pasha’s attitudes and delegation’s policies. This erratic and contradictory behavior suggests there is a more complex force driving the Diaspora’s attitudes and impulses -- a force less concerned with actual policies or realities, and more concerned with asserting a certain ‘alternative’ identity.

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