

Moving Forward or Aside?
Last Chance for Directionless Diasporas
By Viken L. Attarian

<slide 1 – Cover>

Thank you for that introduction. It is inspiring to be at this forum which is being co-sponsored by the Shahan Natali Foundation. Shahan Natali is the modern equivalent of our legendary Sassoontzi Tavit, and yet the true history of the man remains unexplored and largely dark. We could learn a lot about ourselves by embarking on that specific journey. Our lack of knowledge of Natali and what he stood for is however merely the tip of the iceberg.

What I will talk about is really a very high level view. I am a very big-picture and long-term kind of guy. I can discuss details, and occasionally I will. I know that the devil is always in the detail, but I think that we have collectively lost our sense of Armenian reality, and any radical new thought cannot start at the detail level. This is because no matter what your so-called “leader”s will tell you, you cannot build a building by focusing your thinking on the hinges on the doors. You have to imagine the edifice as a whole in its proposed location. That edifice is what the Diaspora can become, what you and I can make it. But we cannot build it by focusing on the minor details of our “Armenianness”, whatever that may mean, and governing our existence based on those minutiae. That approach has led us to where we are today. Given the same conditions, doing the same things will always lead us to the same outcomes. That is the real meaning of learning from history.

So let’s start with the definition.

<Slide 2>

My definition of the Diaspora is a simple one. **It is the total sum of Armenians inhabiting any geographical location that is NOT part of historical Armenia**, Therefore, by this definition, Armenians living in the Oormia lake region in Iran are NOT in the Diaspora, whereas Armenians living in Tehran are. Armenians that still are living in the Eastern hinterland of Turkey in very sparse numbers or even in larger groups that have

converted to Islam, like the *Hamshenites*, are NOT living in the Diaspora, whereas the Armenians of Istanbul are.

Here is a point of detail. The above distinctions are important, for a variety of reasons, mainly because this simplicity of definition hides many complex subtleties. Many would argue, and indeed have, that the Diaspora is essentially a construct of the Genocide. While that might have been a perceived and also a convenient truth, in the grander scheme of things it is NOT so. Armenian Diasporan communities have much older roots than the Genocide, as simply the examples of Tehran and Istanbul that I mentioned demonstrate. It is extremely crucial to have this distinction in mind when one has to think about issues of identity, our “national cause” (*Hye Tad*), Genocide recognition, rights and struggles, legal and historical claims, community dynamics, political thought and organization and so on.

Once we have established this definition, then a few interesting facts emerge. **Most** Armenians today live in the Diaspora, probably in a 2/1 ratio. This was NOT the case in the recent past. There was a time, at least during my own lifetime, when the ratio was more a 50/50 or even a 55/45 proposition, in favour of most Armenians still living on Armenian lands (remember, parts of the Western territories of Iran and Eastern Turkey are considered part of Historical Armenia by the previous definition). The second interesting fact is that there is a large Diaspora living in Russia or more precisely, the former Soviet Union. This has been a mantra oft repeated by many, but once we look a bit closer, we already see that this “Mega Diaspora” is in fact dispersed across huge geographies, ethnic cultures, cities and rural areas, historical and relatively much newer centers of concentration and even several countries (e.g. in Kazakhstan and the Ukraine). The Armenians in Vladivostok on the other side of Siberia (and there are Armenians in Vladivostok) do not have much in common with Armenians in St. Petersburg, although it would appear that they do. I have been living in Montreal for over 20 years. There are Armenians living in Yellowknife who have been there for over ten years and at least one has married a local aboriginal woman. They and their children have likely more things in common with the Inuit of Nunavut and the Cree of Northern Quebec than with me. This leads to the third factor of the Diasporan reality. Today, the Diaspora is as diverse as the world. There are relatively large Armenian communities (i.e. in the several thousands) in Sweden, the Czech Republic, Spain and New Zealand. The dispersion happened faster than we

could imagine it. If we do nothing, their disappearance is the next tsunami that will hit us and surely catch us unprepared once more.

Given these facts, I can therefore feel very comfortable to claim that because most Armenians live in the Diaspora, **we have become today one of the few global nations**. I say “few global nations” while stressing the fact of “most Armenians living in the Diaspora”. There are for example Chinese, Italian and Indian communities all over the world, but most Chinese, Italians and Indians live in China, Italy or India respectively. Global nations face a different set of challenges of existence and continuity, but they can also exploit different opportunities that would come their way.

That was a bad news/good news story.

Here comes the real bad news.

The Diaspora as a whole has reached today a level of dysfunction that has completely paralyzed it to render it impotent. In fact, it suffers from a collective delusional state about itself, its roles, its abilities and its importance on the political, cultural, or any other sphere of human activity.

The symptoms of this dysfunction are several. Here is another example as a validation of my diagnosis of the “community in a bubble” syndrome.

1. One of my good friends is a well-known Armenian journalist, who also does some translation contract work for various public and private organizations. Some of this work includes periodic translations of highlights of Canadian Armenian print media. The contracting organizations are interested to understand the various issues of concern to our community, whether they are for political, commercial, policy or purely business purposes. And here is what my friend noticed. When he reads translations from print media of other communities, e.g. Russian, Arabic, Persian, South Asian etc. he is confronted with an engagement to understand and comment on the Canadian issues of the day, albeit in varying degrees. Meaning that while the community issues as well as the issues of the “former homeland” are front and center, so are the Canadian societal debates. This is absolutely NOT the case for the Armenian language print media. **It is as if the larger Canadian reality does not exist at all.**

For those of you who follow the Armenian print media, when was the last time you read anything about the gun control registry, the Canadian linguistic debates, euthanasia, the federal vs. provincial jurisdictional issues, the global recessionary impact on the Canadian economy, the Canadian mission to Afghanistan, public vs. private health care delivery models, and so on. There was more print space devoted in the two Canadian Armenian weeklies to the recent so-called “elections” in Lebanon and the positioning of the traditional political parties there than to anything meaningful about what is happening in Canada on the three levels of government. Or let’s go even further, when was the last time you read anything there about true social problems facing our communities which are characteristic of every community, for example about drug addiction, elderly abuse, gay rights, school bullying, spousal violence, child abuse, gang crime etc. etc. Either we believe that these issues do not exist and are therefore irrelevant, or we just want to sweep them under the proverbial carpet. In both cases, we are delusional in our ignorance. I am sure that you can perform a similar media analysis for the US-based Armenian media.

Regardless of whether you can or cannot explain this dystopia, the question is this. Why would a young person of Armenian descent, born, raised and educated in the West, opening up to the world in heart, mind and career, be attracted to this dysfunctional situation? Why would this person embrace his or her Armenian identity? ***This is the crisis of identity*** that we have been fuelling for several generations across the world. The Armenian reality of existence has absolutely nothing to do with the real world the communities exist in. ***Whammy number one.***

2. Here is another issue of detail. Language. ***The crisis of identity is undoubtedly also fuelled by the defeat of our language.*** In this sense, my Quebecois compatriots have absolutely got it right. **Language IS identity.** Why? Because language frames a mental metaphor of the physical world. It would be impossible to think about any construct without mentally naming them. The language we think in is the identity we embrace, because it also brings with it the historical and linguistic evolutionary and cultural heritage of a people. There are literally tens of thousands of books, studies, theses and publications that discuss the interrelationship between language and

identity, and these documents go back at least two centuries if not more, the libraries of the world are full of them. There is absolutely nothing that is written that claims the opposite, i.e. claiming that language and identity are not related. And yet we keep being told that language is not important and in fact is irrelevant in the identity question, especially in the “new reality” of the Diaspora of mixed marriages, integration of immigrants etc. etc. This kind of rhetoric flies in the face of an absolutely established scientific fact, and would be the equivalent to claiming that the world is flat. And yet no one seems to mind that such statements can be made at all. **Whammy number two.**

3. Why can there be such preposterous claims made? Or why don't we see the reality of our dysfunction? The answer is, because of our self-inflicted blindness. Because we have “killed” off our intellectuals and thinkers. **We have eliminated that rare but most important of human traits, critical thought.** As a result, almost all of our collective assertions become nothing more than propaganda. As a collective, we are no different than herds of sheep. **Whammy number three.**

When there is no critical and independent thinking allowed, there is no dissent that is tolerated, there can be no understanding of the concept of opposition, nor even of the necessity to have one. Critical analysis of our history has instead been replaced by the construction of false myths, and subsequent glorification of anti-heroes. Politics becomes not a debate of ideas, but deteriorates into gang wars over “protection” territory.

4. Have you ever wondered why we do not study the traitors of our history? The only name familiar to the average Armenian is that of *Vasag Syouni*, who supposedly betrayed *Katchen Vartan*. I know that some of you will also mention others, but I am trying to make a point that these names are now comfortably swept away with the dust of many centuries of history. And that's where it stops. Or we think that it stops there. How could it be that our nation thinks that they have so few traitors? Even if we suffered so many historical betrayals in almost every single stage of our multi-millennial history? It is an established fact that vast empires from the Roman to more modern times such as the Ottoman, British, Soviet and recently the American

one are maintained in place by equally vast networks of informants, there is simply no other way to subjugate other people over longer periods. Who are the ones who denounced us to the Turks, the KGB, or even fomented the fratricidal periods of the Cold War? Who was in whose pay? Why can't we study the German archives and find out who the Armenian Nazis were? The archives of the CIA and the KGB have been declassified all the way to the mid sixties, why cannot or why don't we study them? Do we care about this at all and shouldn't we care?

Whammy number four is this total absence of critical understanding of our history. Especially the recent one of the past two hundred years. As a result, we cannot inform ourselves, even if we want to. We do not know how. **This is the crisis of disinformation.**

5. The final crisis that is fuelled by all the previous ones **is the crisis of legitimacy.** Today, to the contrary of all the noise being made, there is absolutely no organization or institution anywhere in the Diaspora that can claim real legitimate representation of this global nation. That is why you see lofty adjectives being thrown about like "biggest, oldest, grouping largest organizations, the strongest, the most numerous," and so on. Political territory is being claimed where there cannot be one. This pseudo-legitimacy would immediately crumble in any semi-judicial legal setting for example when we hope to discuss any claims or territorial rights, because once again, we live with the illusion of representation, and yet there is no legitimacy whatsoever.

These five crises are not isolated. They are all interrelated and feed off each other creating an almost insolvable Gordian knot. Spending time trying to solve it and trying to find a loose end to attach to is ill-advised. Because it will force the one who tries to do so to get mired once more in the details. To focus again on the hinges of basement doors and the mechanics of interrelationships of a dysfunctional existence, instead of on the edifice that needs to be built.

<slide 3>

The five horsemen of the Diasporan Acopalypse ride over a landscape of real intellectual desolation. Mediocrity reigns supreme, because no one even remembers the truth, let alone tries to challenge the demagogues. That is

why for example, we do not realize that there is something fundamentally wrong with the current distribution of institutional roles. In the absence of deep collective questioning of our reality we do not realize that our political parties in the Diaspora have essentially morphed into organizations that run churches. The churches run schools. And the schools no longer produce free thinkers but are in the business of producing obedient lemmings for the “leadership” of the political parties. Essentially, no one wants to serve their primary *raison-d’être*, but wants instead to play the role of someone else.

What is even more astonishing is that our vocabulary and phraseology is being warped to connote meanings reminiscent of an Orwellian Newspeak. For example, we take pride in the “historical role of our Gregorian Orthodox Church” and call it a “national institution and a national church”, essentially suggesting that to be Armenian means belonging to it from an identity point of view. That position would relegate people like me, a baptized Catholic, to wonder when I ceased to be an Armenian. It would be completely sacrilegious to the Mekhitarists who have probably created Western Armenian culture literally out of nothingness on a formal leper colony off Venice. In my view, any such statement is not only divisive, but downright incendiary and must be immediately chastised, and apologies must be asked for from the hopefully unknowingly guilty. Yet we hear such statements regularly from our secular and religious so-called “leaders”. From pulpits, altars, community center stages, and indoctrinating children in school classrooms. My position is not about political correctness, it is about a thought process that defines Armenianness as something more than belonging to a congregation. At best, it is fuelled by ignorance. At worst, it is designed to undermine us as a people united by something that goes beyond a perceived faith.

On the other hand, our political parties in the Diaspora really have nothing to do with politics on the ground. What is being played is just an illusion of a game, but at the end of the day it is about fencing off smaller and smaller parts of an already minute sandbox. The only room for growth is by taking over another small section from those “others” who are not like “us”. The reason is that, ironically, in the absence of ideas, ideologues flourish. The former is about continuous recreation of our selves, whereas the latter is about a fossilization of the mind and indoctrination. There is no political right and left and center, neither are there any policy matters, nor any thought about long term betterment of the sort of our compatriots in the Diaspora. What is left of the **left** in the ARF or the Hentchagians? What is

the unique Diasporan policy differentiator of the Ramgavars? If the ideas are about social justice then where are the societal debates happening and where is concrete action on the issue being taken? If the issue is about nationalism, how do we reconcile a nationalist platform with a social agenda? Isn't that what the Nazis tried to do? Is that acceptable? If it is, then how can we claim that the Ittihadists and the Kemalists, who are the paragon of nationalism, how can we claim that they were really "bad dudes" that deserve the wrath and condemnation of humanity until the end of time? My point is that there are a lot of obvious inherent contradictions that are very destructive over the long-term. Yet we have absolutely no forums to discuss these matters, not even a place to ask the questions.

Many of my friends and correspondents from Armenia keep asking me as to why the Diasporan collective is not involved in creating a real democracy in Armenia, in fostering civil society there, in struggling for social justice. After all, many Diasporan communities have close to a century of existence in Western liberal democracies. While there are individuals who have mobilized for that effort, there is no institutional involvement on that front. The question of course is which institution would have the ability to do that? The political parties? The benevolent organizations? The Church? Which one of them has any experience or tradition of democracy, ability to struggle for social policy as it is understood and required? **The Diaspora could NOT ever have played such a role in Armenia, because it cannot give what it does not have.**

<This section could be skipped for the sake of time - We have now reached such a stage of this delusionary state that we ourselves have created, that we accept it as the only reality. One would of course be tempted to say that all of this is the result of the Genocide. And there are certainly strong arguments for such a position, after all, how could we have intellectualism when our intellectuals were murdered? However, that was about a century ago. Assuming the rebirth of the collective ethos is the 50th anniversary of the Genocide, then, we have to face the truth that over the last half century, the potential of the Diaspora has in large part been wasted. I say this without any belittlement of the efforts on the Genocide recognition front or the incredible work done by thousands of volunteers. The question is this, should we have been much further ahead than we are now? In my view, the answer is yes.>

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It is on this backdrop that we need to evaluate the recent events in Armenia and the question of the Protocols. The issue is mostly relevant for Armenia's geopolitical game (assuming of course that Serge Sarkissian is the right and legitimate player on the chessboard). I think though that the unfolding of events have said much more about the Diaspora itself. Its impotence, its delusional reality and its inability to even frame the debate.

By far, the best analysis of the Diasporan predicament has been provided by none other than the true intellectual, Denis Donikian of France. I hastened to translate his essay to give it the circulation it deserves. Donikian rightfully suggests that the maincrippler of the Diaspora is the focus on the Genocide. Not as the event itself, but as its self obsession.

I would like to take this premise even further by extending the metaphor. By focusing and defining itself and all of its relevant constructs exclusively in relation to the Genocide, the Diaspora as a whole has become a single-issue entity, a self-perpetuating eternal protest, that does not even know how to channel that protest. Just like MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) are a laudable organization working towards the rightful recognition of this serious tragedy leading to crime and murder on our roads, so has the Diaspora, but only in the best case, focused exclusively on Genocide recognition to the exclusion of anything else as relevant. MADD will never govern this country even though it might succeed in lobbying for some laws. MADD will never provide the vision of a social policy, continuity of purpose, identity and vision for all those who are enthusiastic members of it. All of these concepts are foreign to it and cannot form part of its self-given mandate. As for the Diaspora, it needs this ethos, this self-imagination into another state of existence, a self-governance that goes beyond a thought about itself as a parish, a Diocese and hopefully to reach one of a vibrant, global, culturally diverse people that are occasionally united about specific projects and purpose. If it does not do that, then it has to step aside from the stage of history. With it, will be gone almost two thirds of our nation, and the unique opportunities which could have been ours.

So what does the future hold? I cannot of course tell you that. I can tell what it could hold, if we decide collectively not to step aside.

<Slide 4>

The first aspect that I need to point out is that rules of the games have now been changing for close to twenty years.

The two most important factors that increase the potential for such opportunities are the existence of Armenia and the evolution of the Internet.

The government of Armenia has unprecedented historical potentialities. I will not repeat what is already evident. However, these potentialities can only turn into opportunities and valid strategic options if the Government of Armenia starts sowing the right seeds in the Diaspora, mainly to nurture it, to strengthen it and to support the right processes in the Diaspora itself. The reason is, because it will return to Armenia manifold and over the longer term.

We only reap what we sow. Or as put even better by Toumanian, “Մարդ ինչ անի իրան կ'անի”/ *Mart eench ani, eeran gani (whatever one does, one does only to oneself)*.

As for the Internet, it is also self-evident and I will not elaborate on these points for the lack of time. The only statement is simple. The monopoly of the traditional organizational media is finished and buried forever. And that is a good thing.

<Slide 5>

Here are some concrete projects designed to exploit the brave new technologically interconnected world, while allowing the Diaspora to learn the concept of global mobilization around specific ideas. These projects also allow to do so at all levels, from grassroots all the way into the creation of transnational entities that could experiment with notions of democracy, representation and legitimacy. Finally, they address all the five crises, by creating a solid background material of accessible critical thinking as well as the long-term production of grey matter output.

1. The Global Time capsule project is designed to capture the imagination of all the Diaspora to preserve what every single Armenian believes needs to be preserved for the century following the 100th anniversary of the Genocide. The idea is to have millions of time capsules literally across the globe, buried in backyards, in walls, in public spaces, in personal spaces, in bank vaults etc. The second idea is to record information about these time capsules thus forcing

the participants to engage in a thinking process which they will transmit across generations. The third idea is to use the generated funds from the sale of standardized time capsules to fund initiatives that will ensure that there is someone to open those time capsules a century from now. The Global time capsule project can only succeed if it becomes a grassroots effort in which all Armenians would want to participate.

2. The Armenian Genius fund operates on a similar model as the McCarthur foundation grants. It requires an endowment of about \$15M and assumes an annual return of about \$1M. It selects every year 10 young Armenians (between the ages of 20 to 30) in various fields of human intellectual output (e.g. 5 in sciences 5 in the arts) and grants them \$100k each. No questions asked. The selection criteria are very stringent and use very high calibre international juries. The selection is objective, peer reviewed, and again modeled after existing proven approaches. The idea is to create a generation of people who can produce intellectual output at the global level and will become the shapers of global public opinion.
3. The Global Genocide Centennial Commemorative Stamp Project is a series of experiments in global mobilization, which can work from the classroom level all the way to a full scale international cooperation project. It focuses on the opportunity that several Post Office authorities of the Western world, including the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, France, Australia and likely others now allow the production of personalized postage stamps. The idea can be started at a simple website level that provides tools, templates, links and written arguments to create Genocide commemoration stamps, for example by creating stamps of all the Genocide victims of one's family with photos, or of the hundreds of murdered Armenian intellectuals, or with simple photos birthday and killing day as 24 April 1915. A second level legal team can stand behind the project and can respond to any challenges by postal authorities. Particular success can be accomplished by focusing on the countries that have already recognized the Genocide, other communities can be mobilized around the concept such as the Jewish, Rwandan, Cambodian etc. and joint efforts can be created. In the end, the idea is that millions of Genocide commemoration stamps start circulating around the world

for 2015 and onwards. The global cooperation opportunities on this one are literally only limited by one's imagination.

4. The Save Western Armenian is precisely such a joint project. It assumes that all Armenians will realize that Western Armenian is a treasure that belongs to them all and can only be saved by mobilizing all Armenians. Another related project would be subprojects like *Save the Mekhitarians*, *Save the communities in India*, *Save our Heritage in Jerusalem*. The idea is simple, the Diaspora faces global challenges, and therefore the response must also be to mobilize globally. The Diaspora must be saved if we want Armenia to survive, for a simple reason; because we cannot say which end of a boat is worth saving. Either the boat sinks or it stays afloat.
5. The Ministry of the Diaspora is a reality today, but it needs to have the right budget and the right staff. Its main purpose must be to create mechanisms of tracking Diasporan community evolution using modern tools, such as social theory, demographics, statistics, databases etc. and to propose joint partnership projects that can have positive impact on such communities (such projects can be at community/Armenia level, or can be at country to country level). The idea is to change the dynamic of the Diaspora from being the cash cow of benefactor projects to becoming a full fledged partner which can also receive from the relationship. The Ministry of the Diaspora can be a significant player in the organization of the above projects and in providing state-level support with international institutions. It can also become the interface point for the studying and cooperation opportunities with the official Diasporan Ministries or related bodies of other countries to focus on best practices. It could become the main learning tool and the door opener between Armenia and the world. In fact, there is nothing stopping it from aiming to become world center of excellence on such topics. Once again, only if it wants to.
6. The Diasporan Global Representative body would be a focused response to the crisis of the "Protocols". The real challenge is to have the existing organizations accept such an umbrella structure. The hope is that there is enough goodwill left in them that they will give up control for the common good. The hope is also that right-minded individuals within those organizations will want to make a difference.

No matter how dominant those organizations may be, or rather think they are, in their respective geographies. This has already been demonstrated in the All Armenia Fund. This can be done whenever there is a sincere will to do so. On the other hand, much has been said recently on this topic and many ideas are being floated around. Since some of these ideas have been around for a while and some are more serious than others, let me state my position on this matter. **I do not think that there is any hope for success on this front, unless this new global governance structure is about a very specific project around which the numerously fractured Diasporas can unite.** Grand schemes for creating a representational legitimacy advocating general platitudes like helping Armenia and preserving identity have no chance of survival because that policy space is today occupied by virtually every single Armenian organization. The Diasporas need successful experiments in global mobilization and global democratic practices. They need to learn a lot before they can claim their seat at the table.

I will now attempt to answer your questions. In respect of the topic of today, I would like to ask you to always question the answers you receive, whether they come from me or from anyone else.