

# The Syrian Crisis and Subsequent Strategic Challenges for Armenia



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## Safety of Syrian Armenians Prioritized

If many countries and superpowers are apprehensive of the crisis in Syria in global terms, for the Republic of Armenia this crisis is first and foremost about the safety of Syrian Armenians. Indeed, like many other states Armenia also has its political interests in the Middle East: the Syrian crisis has evoked serious concerns on the horizon of Armenian foreign policy as well. One can, for example, try to analyze the situation, identify which powers support whichever political groups, and assess the military and political developments in Syria. However, our priority at the moment is the security of Syrian Armenians. Therefore, political issues should be discussed and used towards the benefit of Armenians in Syria, in order to prevent any imminent threats to the Armenian community.

## From a Tangible Concern to a Concrete Policy

The issue of safety of Syrian Armenians is indeed critical: regardless of the existence of different and diverse assessments, the situation in general remains uncertain. Perhaps this uncertainty explains the diversity of recommendations and possible solutions, ranging from doing nothing to immediate emigration of Syrian Armenians. Reasons accounting for the uncertainty are different, though the major ones are two: first, the lack of accurate information, which is formed from different, often biased sources, and second, heterogeneity of the parties involved in the crisis, which bars a reliable projection of prospective turns the solution of the crisis may take. In such a case it is essential to have a mechanism flexible enough to respond to future dynamic developments. Let's try to discuss the issue in three dimensions: perceptions of the Armenian society, actions of the Armenian government and official statements.

The dangers Syrian Armenians are facing at the moment are perceived as rather drastic in the Armenian society; often parallels are drawn between the situation in Syria and the Genocide, or the violent events in Baku and Sumgait. Occasionally such sentiments are additionally associated with implications of inaction of the Armenian government. Perhaps the reason accounting for such perceptions and responses is the current information vacuum in Armenia. Moreover, Armenian mass media lacks capacities and experience to respond and inform the society adequately under crises and situations with critical uncertainties.

The government's assessments of the dangers Syrian Armenians are facing are more sober, and are deprived of dramatization, characterizing the social perceptions. For instance, the government does not think that the anti-government movement in Syria is anti-Armenian as well, and believes that Armenians are not a target for the military actions. This, however, does not mean that the violent actions will spare the Armenian districts. The fact that the Syrian Armenians get involved in military actions simply means that they are citizens of Syria, ready to protect their families. To separate the issue of safety of Syrian Armenians from the context of security of the general population of Syria may result in uninvited implications and controversies, by focusing attention on the Syrian Armenians, which at the moment fortunately is not the case.

Though Armenia's current political feedback to the situation can be described as reasonable and cautious, it has resulted in an information vacuum and uncertainty regarding the further actions. The Armenian government has failed to ensure pre-meditated public statements on its foreign policy, in parallel with actions it has undertaken in the past. Official statements and declarations as a rule have followed the actions, meetings and agreements, and have essentially been responses to those. Developments in Syria are not an exception. Thus, on the background of the protracted Syrian conflict the hesitant procrastination of the information vacuum regarding the official stands, intentions and actions, creates an objectionable internal tension. Perhaps a streak of positivity appeared with the new



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role and initiative of the Ministry of Diaspora. Such an initiative may even become a precedent for the future. For instance, the Ministry of Diaspora, in closely collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a number of other relevant state agencies can develop official statements and initiate internal discussions on the perils and challenges Armenian communities in the world face, highlighting the importance of the role of the Republic of Armenia in this coordination effort. Meanwhile, the responsibility for maintaining the foreign relations of the country (in this case in the context of Syrian issues) with the whole arsenal of possible actions should be carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The latter should coordinate the whole process either. It should be noted that the National Security Council, which functionally is the coordinating agency in such matters, has in fact failed so far as an institute.

### **National Security Dimension**

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On the background of the issue of safety of Syrian Armenians another gap has been identified as well: if the issue of their safety is a challenge to the security of the Republic of Armenia, then the existing legislative mechanisms, procedures and institutions responsible for such issues should have been in place when facing a challenge. Whereas, all the latter remain irresponsive, simply because the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia which defines the state priorities and adequate actions in the security sector, and the Military Doctrine, do not consider the Syrian crisis to be a challenge to the security of the Republic of Armenia. Therefore, the government is not responsible for addressing the issues emerging from this crisis. According to the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Armenia, the security borders of the country are defined by the territories of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, whereas the regional risks are to be dealt using the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and NATO instruments.

Though the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, recognizes the “decline of national and cultural identity of the Armenian Diaspora” as a threat to the national security of Armenia, the country lacks appropriate mechanisms to address the imminent, dynamic and rapidly developing challenges. The Syrian crisis showed that decisions are being made and actions identified in parallel with the daily developments on the field, and under the pressure of serious shortcomings in terms of strategic benchmarks and a holistic policy. In general, the state policy on national security and the adequate mechanisms did not pass the test of the Syrian challenge. Thus, the issues of ensuring the comprehensiveness of the national security system, and elaborating and introducing functional mechanisms for the implementation of both the policy and the strategy are back on the agenda.

### **The Dimension of Human Rights Protection**

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The Syrian crisis highlighted not only the shortcomings in the policy on the national security, but also in the policy, legal regulation and practice of protection of human rights, essentially the lack of functional mechanisms in this sphere. For instance, though the RA Law on Refugees and Asylum Seekers regulates the issues of ensuring the rights of the refugees and asylum seekers, today it is clear that in case of possible humanitarian crisis, the enactment mechanisms are rather faulty. Whereas, it is obvious that Armenia needs to get ready to accept a large number of asylum seekers. Elaboration of a realistic plan for possible emigration of Armenian populations from the beds of crises, similar to Syria at the moment, should be included in the task lists of responsible state agencies. One of the exemplary practices can be the emigration of Beta Israel, Ethiopian Jews.

However, in case of Syria, implementation of such a plan requires existence of a number of factors. First, it is necessary that the Syrian Armenians clearly express their will to move to Armenia, which so far has not been the case. Second, Armenia should be ready to accept them. Third, there is need for a humanitarian aid programme and a subsequent realistic resource base, especially in case of such a large Diaspora community. It is crucial that the burden for mobilization of the humanitarian efforts is not laid solely on the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, and the State Migration Service, but is proportionally shared among other relevant government agencies. Though the mentioned agencies play a key role in development of assistance policy and its implementation, if there is a crisis, no state agency should remain passive in the aid process: in order to successfully implement the aid programme, there is a need for financial resources, shelters and a number of other public resources. Thus, the RA Central Bank, the government and other agencies have administrative spaces, for instance, resorts, which in case of necessity should be ready to accept Armenian refugees from Syria and provide all the necessary services.

## **Instead of an Epilogue**

In Armenia the Syrian crisis is perceived as an issue of safety of Syrian Armenians, which should be addressed in the benefit of the Armenian community in Syria, both at the moment and in future, regardless of what this future might be. There is no certain timeline for the stabilization of the situation in Syria; therefore it is necessary to continue the currently cautious and balanced policy. The military actions, probable anarchy, absence of public order, possible food and water crisis remain unpredictable. Thus, Armenia needs to get ready to provide humanitarian aid in case of necessity and provide proper mechanisms to assist Syrian Armenians seeking asylum. This should not exclude the possibility of providing humanitarian aid on the Syrian territory. Though the need for all these interventions is currently not quite palpable, getting ready for the worst case scenario should start today. Indeed, a quote from one of the most sensible politicians of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Cardinal de Retz is more than timely: “People often err and make mistakes because they are too scared of incidental peril, whereas they do not sufficiently fear an imminent danger, which awaits them in the curves of the future”. In parallel, there is a need to review the Military Doctrine and the National Security Strategy, since these documents did not stand the test of the Syrian crisis. Mobilization of internal resources should continue, as well as raising public access to accurate information: an RA citizen should clearly understand the need for supporting Syrian Armenians and be able to identify the relevant mechanisms for doing so, and the state authorities should get ready to face all possible scenarios and elaborate functional mechanisms for collaboration and coordination.

*The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion “ Syria: Regional Context and Issues of Armenians”, which took place on 18 July, 2011. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.*

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