

Syrian Crisis and New Security Dimensions



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Old Issues Surfacing on the New Agenda: Lessons Learnt from the Syrian Crisis

Since the very first days of the Syrian crisis the issue of emigration of Syrian Armenians to Armenia appeared on the political agenda of the Republic of Armenia. The first response of the government was the facilitation of the procedure to acquire an Armenian passport. Meanwhile, there is no immigration programme in the country, no relevant policy. There is no social accord regarding the issue and no response mechanisms.

During war in Iraq the dangers and challenges the Armenian community in this country was facing were voiced out and a need for an immigration programme was identified. Though discussions were held back then, no significant developments were recorded, and none of the discussions resulted in any concrete programme and policy. The issue was put off until the next crisis triggered its renewal.

Moreover, the Syrian crisis necessitated a review of our approaches and the relevant policy towards the institute of dual citizenship. Indeed, after the introduction of dual citizenship, the concepts on the security of the Republic of Armenia have never been revised. For the recent years dual citizens have significantly increased in number, however, the issue of their safety remains yet to be addressed. While the issue of safety of Syrian Armenians holding dual citizenship is still unresolved, their number may increase quite drastically, thus evoking both qualitative and quantitative challenges.

Immigration: A Desirable Goal, or a Forced Action?

Does immigration solve the issue of safety of Syrian Armenians? We believe that immigration and the security of the Armenian communities in Syria are practically very different. The priorities are different; different solutions and approaches are required; and the outcomes will be different. Immigration is associated with demographic priorities. In parallel, it offers clear safety guarantees to Armenians having chosen immigration as a solution.

But do Syrian Armenians really want to leave their country and resettle in Armenia? Perhaps many of them would like to do so if they had a clear idea of where they are moving, under what conditions and what they can expect in future. However, today they do not seem to have any such idea: positively tinted emotional perception of a historical homeland is prevailing among them. Moreover, Armenia does not have a special law or strategy regulating immigration and return of Diasporan Armenians. The initiative of facilitating citizenship acquisition for Syrian Armenians is more of a rapid response to an accidental imperative.

The first impediment for the simultaneous attempt to support Syrian Armenians and manage the immigration issues is time. On one hand, at any moment now there may be a need to quickly evacuate Syrian Armenians en masse from Syria, and receive them in Armenia. On the other hand, issues of full Armenian citizenship of Syrian Armenians, implementation of programmes on their integration to the Armenian society require long-term efforts and significant resources. Finally, the Armenian community in Syria is very old, and comprises several generations. It is stratified, social classes are quite distinct, and there is a clear dividing line between urban and rural residents. There are also mixed marriages in the community.

With an Open Hand Turned into a Fist

It is high time that Armenia finally decides on its priorities and develops a clear vision of its future. We want to have both a strong Diaspora and a powerful Armenia. Or are we ready to strengthen the Republic of Armenia at the expense of the Diaspora, even through its decline and weakening? For instance, the Armenian community in Syria is one of the strongest, multi-layered and stable Armenian communities in the world. It is simply unacceptable to make a decision about the evacuation and



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immigration of Syrian Armenians arbitrarily. It is crucial to develop both a social accord in this regard, and a detailed programme on immigration, which should employ sufficient resources. Eventually, it is impossible to compel the Diasporan communities, even at the pretext of providing aid during a crisis, to emigrate and resettle in Armenia. If there are no sufficient conditions in the country for them to live and integrate with the society, the returnees will briefly leave Armenia, a homeland acquired only for a short time.

One thing is clear: strategically it is high time to bring the issue of immigration on the agenda. Armenia-Diaspora Conference can serve as an adequate platform for the discussion of pan-Armenian strategic issues, since it initially started with the goal of elaboration of strategic decisions, rather than one to provide for the interests of specific groups. Thus, it is necessary to convene an Armenia-Diaspora Conference on a possibly short notice, and put the issue of Syrian Armenians, Diaspora and immigration on its agenda.

Dual Citizenship: A New Ground for Nationalism?

In 2007 Armenia adopted and has since consistently supported the institute of dual citizenship, which has become one of the most important legal knots on the canvas binding the Republic of Armenia and Diaspora. For the last five years not only were the legal and institutional foundations of dual citizenship laid, but the number of dual citizens has gradually increased as well. The quantitative changes resulted in qualitatively new opportunities and challenges, which still remain unresolved. The Syrian crisis, among many other issues, was the one that put the issue of safety of dual citizens on the agenda. The latter features a number of important questions: What are the limits of the RA national security?; Is security defined only by territorial characteristics?; Why and how should Armenia ensure the safety of its dual citizens?; What are the limitations of the opportunities and demands? The questions are many and all require immediate answers, because the crisis intensifies not only the issue of response, but also increases the number of dual citizens. In the contemporary definition of 'nationalism', the border of 'Armenian' policy lies through the door of an Armenian holding dual citizenship, regardless of the whereabouts of this door protecting an Armenian family. Therefore, the national security of the Republic of Armenia is not limited to the territories of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, but extends to Armenian communities worldwide and comprises the issues of their safety and security.

Summary

Currently the major challenge for Syrian Armenians is the humanitarian crisis. In this regard, the main response and basic action Armenia needs to take is provision of humanitarian aid in the Armenian community. Additionally, it needs to provide moral support and undertake political actions based on the logic of a balanced "Don't harm". Possible programmes on immigration, whether forced, adjacent and the moment fortunately only probable, are secondary. Indeed, the strategic decision on supporting the immigration of any concrete Armenian community suffering a crisis should be left to the joint discussion of Armenia and Diaspora. However, in the Syrian crisis priorities are quite clear, and have been voiced both by the secular and religious leaders of Armenian communities in Syria, and community members: the programme of saving people from imminent danger is a temporary solution to the issue of safety of Syrian Armenians, after which they can decide whether they want to stay or leave. At least in this case immigration to Armenia is just a means to ensure their safety and not a goal. Meanwhile, it is necessary to review the priorities of the security of the Republic of Armenia and its domestic and foreign policies, and subsequently all relevant documents, which should include issues of safety of dual citizens and protection of their rights and interests. Many of these documents were elaborated before the introduction of the institute of dual citizenship. On the background of modern pan-Armenian realities Susan Anthony's epochal idea can be paraphrased as the following: "Armenia is us: dual citizens and citizens of the Republic of Armenia, not simply Christian Armenians living in the Republic of Armenia, and not even all the people living in the Republic, but all of us who hold citizenship of the Republic of Armenia and have created an Armenian state... Armenia is their rights and nothing more... She is the dual citizens living in Diasporan communities, their rights and nothing less".

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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