

The Armenian Diaspora and Iran's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Armenians of Iran cannot be considered part of the Armenian diaspora scattered around the world since they have lived in this territory for millennia. However, in terms of identity and historical memory, they share quite a lot with Armenian communities in other countries. As an Iranian ethnic group, they have played a decisive role in very eventful period of Iran's history, especially since the last decade of 19th century when constitutionalism began to touch Iran's intellectual circles. Over the next century, such a prominent role persisted to different extents. Today, Armenians still have remarkable capacities to be involved in resolving some of the domestic and international problems Iran faces. In this paper, we have tried to find out, "How can the presence of the Armenian community affect Iran's interests in terms of foreign relations?" Our hypothesis is that, "The presence of the Armenian community in Iran, with their own potentials and capacities of the larger Armenian diaspora in different parts of the world, will provide the Islamic Republic of Iran with opportunities to widen the scope of its foreign policy choices and as a result, boost its economic and political interests". This subject has been investigated in the article using a descriptive-analytical approach.

Keywords: Armenia, Diaspora, Foreign Policy, Host Countries, Iran, Lobbying.

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Introduction

Armenians have been territorially tied to Iran for millennia. Some of them have always lived in the territory that still belongs to Iran, and others have moved to Iran in the last five centuries for various reasons. They have always been an influential minority group especially in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many Armenians who have left Iran and now reside in North America or Western Europe still hold strong connections with Iran. Iran can be considered the only non-hostile neighbor to Armenians for at least the past century. In the following pages, first, we will briefly investigate the capacities and influence of the largest Armenian communities in their host countries, then review the role Iranian-Armenians have played over the centuries, and finally address the opportunities available to Iran's foreign policy due to Iranian connection to and interactions with Armenians.

The Armenian Diaspora and their Influence in Host Countries

The Armenian diaspora is made up of Armenians living outside the Republic of Armenia and Karabakh. Constructivists hold that ethnic identities gain significance and consolidate in a process of exchanging ideas and meanings inside and outside the group. According to constructivist assumptions, relations and interactions among the members of a group are the main factors for constructing ethnic identities. Language, religion, rites, customs, and other cultural and even physical indicators of a group provide them with appropriate content to construct national or ethnic identity. Social constructivism considers ethnicity neither essential nor natural, and underlines the process of constructing identities through social interaction (Seyed Emami, 2008: 15, 24-25).

Once a relatively stable identity is made, actors are likely to contribute to its preservation. A consolidated identity will not be abandoned unless advantages of achieving a new identity are estimated greater than advantages of retaining the established one (Zehfuss, 2004: 56). Aspirational Constructivism holds that the psychological need for collective self-esteem includes the needs for being valuable and influential. A collective self-esteem can originate from inter-subjective memories of "national self" and aspirations for

future. Political elite can represent national identity through constructing and reconstructing the image of the “national self” (Clunan, 2013).

Armenians were deprived of political sovereignty for several centuries until the demise of the Soviet Union (exception is the short period of 1918-1920). Despite, their ethnic identity was consolidated and never eroded throughout periods of being dominated by external powers and after several waves of immigration. Being surrounded by mostly hostile neighbors that formed a powerful “other” and struggling to survive among enemies led to the continuity of the Armenian identity. Gregorian religion and Armenian language have acted as cornerstones of the distinctive Armenian identity. Today, for more than two-thirds of Armenian community who live outside the republic of Armenia, the Armenian ethnic identity is still a significantly relevant issue. All over the world, Armenians are organized around their Armenian identity to different degrees, and these ethnic associations have gained remarkable influence in the host countries.

Three major events have culminated in the dispersion of Armenian population around the world: annihilation of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire (1915-1923), exodus from Soviet Armenia in 1970s and 1980s due to political repression, and immigration from the independent Republic of Armenia due to economic difficulties (Armenian Revolutionary Federation Official Site, 9/4/2014). The total population of Armenians across the world is over 10 million (HAIAS, 2018), and only about three millions of them reside within the Republic of Armenia. Their largest diaspora groups live in Russia (2.2 million), U.S. (1.5 million), and France (0.5 million). Georgia, Iran, Ukraine, Poland, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Argentina, and Canada also host considerable numbers of Armenians (International Labor Organization, 2012).

At least two waves of emigration have led to the emergence of *Old* and *New* diasporas with different identities and different perceptions of homeland. The *Old* diaspora was created by the massacre and ethnic cleansing in Ottoman Empire in Eastern Turkey (called Western Armenia by Armenians). For the *Old* diaspora, Soviet Armenia was not the homeland. Most of them consider independent Armenia only part of

the Great Armenia, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, their real homeland is somewhere in contemporary Turkey. The *New* diaspora, which includes those who left Armenia in late 1980s, after the 1988 earthquake, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have emigrated from Armenia voluntarily and mostly for economic considerations. They have left families and friends behind in Armenia, and are motivated to contribute to the Armenian economy. The *Old* or established diaspora is the classic, archetypical, and victimized type of diaspora still suffering from collective trauma of exile with constant dreams of the homeland in mind. The *Old* diaspora communities, unlike those living in Russia and other post-Soviet republics, have managed to mobilize and organize their resources through religious and cultural activities and around ideas concerning recognition of genocide and anti-Turk sentiments. Armenian lobbyists are among the most successful interest groups in Middle-East, France, and the U.S. (Chakhalyan, 2007: 21-27).

The Armenian diaspora has been remarkably successful in directing international aid to the Republic of Armenia (Gyulumyan, 2008: 8). The diaspora is an exceptionally valuable asset for the Armenian national economy. Fast economic growth after 1999 is, to a considerable extent, owed to diaspora's investment in infrastructure, remittances, and direct investment (Hergnyan and Makaryan, 2006). In the first decade following the demise of the Soviet Union, 70-90 percent of the humanitarian assistance delivered through Armenian organizations was provided by lobbying efforts and thus had non-Armenian origins (Manaseryan, 2004). Armenians of Russia, U.S., Iran, France, Syria, and Lebanon, have the biggest shares of diasporic investment in Armenia respectively (Handbook for Armenians Abroad, 2012).

Because of the Soviet- and post-Soviet-era migrations, Russia now hosts the largest population of ethnic Armenians outside Armenia, having overtaken the United States. Given the three-million population of the Republic of Armenia, the role of Russia as an investor and ally, the economic impact of diaspora remittances, philanthropy, and investment, and Russian-Armenians' potential influence on the Republic of Armenia are significant (Cavoukian, 2013: 713).

At least five entrepreneurs of Armenian descent - Samuel Karapetyan, brothers Nikolai and Sergei Sarkisov, Ruben Vardanyan, and Albert Avdolyan - were among the 200 richest businesspersons of Russia in 2018; their aggregate wealth amounts to \$6.8 billion according to Forbes. Samuel Karapetyan is the owner of the Tashir Group and his wealth amounted to \$3.7 billion in 2018. Ruben Vardanyan, the co-founder of the investment boutique "Vardanyan, Broymann and Partners" and founder of many other projects in Russia and Armenia, was ranked 109th for his \$950 million wealth. Other Armenian millionaires in Russia are Nikolai Sarkisov, the vice-president of RESO-Garantia, and his brother Sergei whose wealth are estimated around \$750 million each and ranked 141st and 142nd. Finally, Albert Avdolyan, the co-founder of Telconet with his \$700 million wealth is at the 146th place (News.am, 19/4/2018).

The elite class of Armenians in Russia has made some considerable efforts to organize associations for addressing Armenians' interests. In the first Armenian Diaspora Conference in the fall of 1999, a group of Armenian community leaders in Russia decided to meet with the objective of creating a Russian-wide Armenian organization, the Union of Armenians of Russia (UAR). A founding committee first met in November 1999 in Moscow, under the direction of wealthy Armenia-born businessman Ara Abrahamyan, who would become the UAR's first and, to date, only president. Abrahamyan made his great fortune in the post-Soviet Russia. He is the founder of Soglasie, a leading investment firm, and has significant holdings in the Russian diamond industry. In October 2003, Abrahamyan decided to expand this model of diaspora umbrella organization further and established the World Armenian Congress to unite all diaspora Armenians under one title. Many of the UAR's activities are greatly reminiscent of Soviet Friendship of the Peoples-type events. Perhaps the most obvious example was in 2000, when a church (St. Anna) and museum were built in Malishka, Armenia-Abrahamyan's home village, both dedicated to "Russian-Armenian friendship". The UAR has also visited the Russian army base near Gyumri, Armenia, where Russian troops still guard the Armenian border with Turkey, to highlight the strategic "friendship" between the two nations. The UAR has been vocally supportive of the ruling elites in Russia. Abrahamyan has been

awarded the Drouzhba (Friendship) medal, the Russian Federation's successor to the Soviet Drouzhba Narodov (Friendship of the Peoples) award (Cavoukian, 2013: 717- 720).

Perestroika and the Karabakh crisis played a major role in reviving Armenian community life in Russia. Armenians are generally active in all sectors of social, political, and cultural life in Russia; for example, some act as deputies in the State Duma and Federation Council, and there have been a few Armenians occupying ministerial-level posts. There are also numerous Armenians working in various business sectors, many of them Armenian-speaking and with strong ties to Armenia as well as to the Armenian Diaspora in Russia (Oussatcheva, 2001). Almost half of the Russian-speaking and well-educated Armenians who have been long-time residents of Moscow and especially Moscow-born Armenians are employed in science, education and culture; they are also represented by rather small groups in industry, transport, construction and trade (Galkina, 2006: 188). The Armenians arriving in Russia from 1988 onwards are not as educated as the pre-Perestroika migrants and not as well-integrated; many of them are temporary labor migrants who work illegally and continue to face citizenship, residency, and employment challenges as well as physical security threats that affect their daily lives. This wave of migration continues, with at least 20,000 people leaving Armenia each year, mostly for economic reasons (Cavoukian, 2013: 713-714).

As mentioned earlier, the United States is home to the second largest Armenian diaspora community in the world. The U.S. has provided \$2 billion in aid to Armenia since 1992, which makes Armenia one of the largest recipients of US aid per capita in the world. The lobbying by Armenian Diaspora groups in the US government and Congress has been crucial to securing this outcome. The most active of these lobbying organizations are the Armenian Association of America (AAA), and the larger Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), the latter being affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaks), which is a nationalist Armenian political party formed in 1890 with some seats in the Armenian parliament. Among the most prominent diasporic donors has been the Lincy Foundation run by California-based capitalist Kerk Kirkorian, which, on its own, has invested nearly \$300 million in

Armenia since independence. More recently, however, it has been the diaspora community in Russia that has provided the most significant financial flows into the Armenian economy; as of 2008, remittances from Armenians working in Russia accounted for 15% of Armenia's official GDP (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 9/12/2014).

The Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues (Armenian Caucus) is an informal, bipartisan group of legislators dedicated to maintaining and strengthening the U.S.-Armenia relationship and was established in 1995. The coordinated efforts of this diverse coalition of Congressional Friends of Armenia and the Armenian-American community help raise awareness of Armenian-American issues on Capitol Hill, in the White House, and among the American people. Under their leadership, and with the hard work of Armenian-Americans throughout the country, membership in the Caucus has almost doubled since 2001, and it continues to grow. In the second session of the 116th Congress, 108 Members of the U.S. House of Representatives served on the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues (Armenian Assembly of America, n.d.).

From all this, we can easily conclude that the impact of the Armenian diaspora is incredibly significant on the political and economic life of their host countries; Russia and the United States are the most important among these host countries due to the decisive role they play on the world stage. The great achievements of the Armenian diaspora in these two countries are not proportionate to the relatively small Armenian population living there. Thus, one may notice the remarkable contribution of human and social capital the Armenian diaspora enjoys besides its material wealth. The Armenian diaspora associations can affect the process of policymaking in United States and Russia, and such a capacity can be highly relevant to states interacting with these great powers.

Iranian-Armenians over the Centuries

Iranian-Armenians, like other Armenian diaspora communities in the Middle East, share their political attitudes, goals, and concerns with the *Old* diaspora. Armenian Apostolic Church is the most prominent branch of the Oriental Orthodox Church in Iran. Orthodox Armenians are the largest group of Iranian Christians. Their population is

estimated to be around 80,000 (HAIAS, 2018). About 10,000 of Iranian-Armenians are Catholics who mostly live in Tehran and Isfahan (Van Gorder, 2010: 204 and 205). During the Safavid rule, Armenian businesspersons were the main actors who led the Iranian trade with Europe, Russia, and India; they superseded the British in silk trade. Some Armenians left Iran in the second half of the 17th century subsequent to Shah Abbas's death (Bournoutian, 1994).

Thanks to the trade links between the Qajars and the Armenians of the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century, the Armenian community of Iran was revived. Armenians initiated new businesses on the shores of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, and once again started to make trade deals with Russia, India & Europe. The support of Qajar Kings for Armenians attracted them to Tehran. They were sent to Europe as early ambassadors of Iran because of their language skills and connections abroad. During the Qajar rule, Armenians introduced modern thoughts, Western art, and technological innovations to Iranian society. Armenians of North-Western Iran were influenced by national and political ideas of Caucasian Armenians, and played an important role in the eventful decades of early 20th century Iran. In early 20th century, Iran, like Egypt, was a dynamic hub for Middle-Eastern Armenians. The constitutional revolution of Iran is to a considerable extent beholden to Armenians who brought new ideas to Iran and made sacrifices to establish rule of law in their homeland. They were inspired by Russian and Ottoman Armenians due to geographical proximity to the Caucasus and Eastern Anatoly.

When the Pahlavi dynasty took power in Iran, a new era began for Iranian Armenians. Pahlavi's reforms and attempts to modernize Iran provided Armenians with countless opportunities for progress. They soon started to shine in the fields of science and art. During this period, Tehran, like Beirut, was again one of the most dynamic and prosperous Armenian centers. Many Armenian churches, schools, cultural clubs, and sports clubs were founded and developed, and Armenian members served in both chambers of the parliament (Bournoutian, 1994). Peaceful coexistence of Armenians with their Muslim compatriots survived the revolution, and the Islamic republic treated Orthodox and Catholic Armenians kindly (Van Gorder, 2010:

179). Armenians are perhaps the most favored minority in today's Iran since they enjoy complete religious freedom (Meral, 2012). Iran is still home to one of the most ideal Armenian communities in the world. Historical traditions have always allowed this ethnic group to preserve their identity and cultural autonomy even in post-1979 Iran.

Armenians' views and Iran's Foreign Policy Issues

As mentioned above, Iranian Armenians enjoy considerable freedom and can contribute to reflect a positive image of Iran on the world stage. In 2012, representative of Tehran's Armenian Church in the Global Council of Churches in South Korea reiterated the positive treatment of religious minorities by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and on behalf of Archbishop Sargsyan urged the U.S. and Western countries to remove sanctions against Iran (Alikonline, 20/11/2013). In September 2016, sixteen Armenian journalists from Armenia, U.S., France, Lebanon, the Czech Republic, and Syria visited Tehran to commemorate the eighty-fifth anniversary of publishing the Armenian newspaper "Alik". All of them were shocked by the dynamism of the Iranian-Armenian community and the level of social and cultural freedom it enjoys. Subsequent to this visit, editor-in-chief of *Asbarez* and the *California Courier* wrote about their exceptional trip to Iran which helped them to go beyond the usual stereotypes about the country (Alikonline, 7/10/2016).

The Iranian parliament has two Armenian members representing Armenians of Northern and Southern parts of Iran. Since the constitutional revolution (1906) and establishment of a parliament in Iran, Armenians have been represented in this institution (Hooys, 25/1/2014). The Islamic Republic of Iran has allowed Armenians to run all of their traditional businesses including production and sale of alcoholic drinks within the Armenian community for their own consumption (despite its legal ban for Iranian Muslims). The Armenian language is still being taught and Iran's Ministry of Education publishes special books for Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews, to encourage their monotheism and prevent spread of non-religious and secular beliefs among them (Van Gorder, 2010: 179-183). Generally, Armenians as an ethnic and religious minority in Iran have not been deprived of their political and cultural rights. This well-

documented fact can neutralize negative propaganda about violations of human rights in Iran.

Iranian-Armenians have been only second to Russian and American Armenians as investors in the Republic of Armenia during the first fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Chakhalyan, 2007: 31). Every summer, Iran is the destination for thousands of Armenians from different countries who visit Iran as pilgrims of the St. Thaddeus Monastery, where the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church had been for 600 years (Alikonline, 20/6/2014). On the one hand, thus, Iran is an attractive destination for Armenian tourists, and on the other, Iranian tourists make up a big proportion of tourists visiting Armenia. Hence, tourism will probably remain a major aspect of mutual relationship in future. In 2017, 220,000 Iranians visited Armenia, a 16 percent increase from 2016, according to official data (Eurasianet, 26/3/2018). Considering the complexities of the Caucasus region and attempts of regional and trans-regional powers to contain Iran's influence, Iranian policymakers can rely on the Armenian community to strengthen ties with Armenia. Iranian-Armenians can be ambassadors for stronger relations between the countries.

Iran has been far less successful than most of its neighboring countries in terms of attracting foreign investment. The Armenian diaspora in Europe, U.S., and Russia can be urged to invest in Iran through encouraging government policies and Iranian-Armenians. As mentioned in the previous section, Armenians of the U.S. actively participate in the political life of their host country, and strongly affect U.S. policy towards the Republic of Armenia and its neighbors. Armenia has received huge amounts of aid from the U.S. thanks to lobbying attempts of the Armenian diaspora in America. The Republic of Azerbaijan has even experienced American sanctions as a result of the role played by the Armenian lobbying groups (Gyulunyan, 2008: 9, 15). Azeri officials claim that the European parliament criticizes Baku because of Armenian influence (Asbarez, 14/9/2012). Armenian lobbying in the U.S. Congress has also played in favor of Russia (Turkish Weekly, 10/17/2007). Having these facts in mind, we come to the conclusion that Armenian lobbying can help mitigate

international pressures on Iran and mobilize the Armenian diaspora's support for Iran across the world.

In addition, the Islamic republic of Iran could use the Armenian support as a means to regulate relations with Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan. These two neighbors have at times implicitly fanned the ethnic flames in Iran to achieve their interests. Iran must avoid ignoring the remarkable capacities of Armenian lobbies since the Republic of Azerbaijan is expanding ties with the Jewish lobbies in the U.S. Congress to downplay human rights violations in their country, and to thwart the Armenian lobbies (Euraisanet, 13/2/2015).

Generally, the Armenian diaspora shares many positions with the Islamic republic of Iran on regional issues including the current crisis in Syria (Alikonline, 19/6/2014). Armenians of Lebanon have sided with Hizbullah and the March 8 alliance (Safarian, 12/2/2011).

Mediation efforts between Turkey and Armenia on the one side and between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan on the other can improve Iran's prestige on the international stage. Of course, this will not be an easy task considering the level of hostilities and since despite Iran's neutrality in the Karabakh conflict, both sides were worried about its position. Iran must be cautious and keep the balance among its three neighbors.

Unfortunately, over the last decade, many Armenians have left Iran; this has mostly been due to economic difficulties facing all Iranians and not discrimination against them. Emigration is an easily achievable goal for minority groups of Iran; for example, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), funded by the U.S. government, helped minorities immigrate (Stepanian, 2010). During the last decade, about 5,000 Armenians have emigrated from Iran, and if the rate continues like this, the Armenian population of Iran will decrease to only a few thousands in a decade. The HIAS has stopped supporting minorities in Iran because of financial problems, but certainly other institutions will replace it (Safarian, 2010).

Conclusion

Iran as an immediate neighbor of Armenia enjoys close relations with this country. Iran hosts the St. Thaddeus Monastery and therefore has a uniquely prominent position among the host countries of Gregorian

Armenians. Armenians have a friendly attitude towards Iran; different groups of the Armenian diaspora from various countries share this attitude. Most of the preoccupations, difficulties, and demands of Iranian-Armenians are similar to those of their Muslim compatriots and any positive change and development in Iran will be as beneficial to them as to other Iranian citizens. Considering the Armenian capacities as one of the most powerful and influential ethnic lobbies in the world, their friendly attitude can be a precious asset for Iran's foreign policy. However, taking advantage of the strength and wealth of this ethnic community to realize national goals requires policymakers' attention to their concerns. Until now, Iran has experienced many concrete opportunities because of its strong ties with the Armenian community. Mitigating international pressures on Iran, attracting foreign investment, advancing national interests while dealing with the United States and Russia, and balancing relations with the Caucasian neighbors are among the most prominent goals of Iran's foreign policy where Armenian diasporic institutions can help in achieving. Nonetheless, fulfilling such a potential requires policymakers' serious efforts.

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