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Between Ambivalence and Intrusion: Politics and Identity in Armenia-Diaspora Relations

Razmik Panossian

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Diaspora 7:2 1998 Between Ambivalence and Intrusion: Politics and Identity in Armenia-Diaspora Relations1
Razmik Panossian London School of Economics and Political Science What are we, after all, we and our land?
Even if we try to mince the truth We are tourists in our own land. Guests in our own homes. A river with only
one bank, A mountain which we only view from afar;2 An unpeopled land, a landless people, and scattered
beads which cannot be restrung. —Gevork Emin, "We." The irony of this poem is that it was not written in the
diaspora, but in the "homeland" of Soviet Armenia, by one of its most prominent poets. And yet, he is still
haunted by the uncertainty of being a "tourist" in his "own land" and by the rootlessness of being part of "a
landless people." The poet, living in the Soviet Armenian republic, is nevertheless drawn to the lost lands

beyond the borders of his country, to the heartland of historic Armenia, presently located in Turkey, which was emptied of its indigenous Armenian population through the 1915 Genocide. Emin captures the ambiguity in the question "where is my homeland?"—a question much more commonly posed by diasporic people. The answer is difficult because of the variations and overlap in the very definitions of "homeland" and of "Armenianness" in both the diaspora and the homeland. For the past eighty years, Armenians have been arguing, sometimes vehemently, over homeland-diaspora relations. Consequently, the essential division within the Armenian nation, and within its major diaspora communities, has been, and still is, over the question of how to relate to (formerly Soviet) Armenia, the surviving "kin-state"³ of the much broader and ambiguous notion of the "Armenian homeland." In this article, I analyze the politics of this division, focusing on the ten-year period between February 1988 and February 1998. The first date ushered in the national movement in Armenia—the 150 Diaspora^{7:2} 1998 beginning of the end of Soviet rule. The second date brought to an end the formative phase of post-Soviet Armenian politics when President Levon Ter-Petrossian—in power since 1991—was forced to resign as a result of a "velvet coup." In addition to the 1988-1998 decade, previous history must also be examined, along with related issues of identity, since Armenian politics cannot be understood without these factors. The modern Armenian diaspora is much more than a mere extension of the homeland; it has become an entity in its own right, with various sources of identity. In fact, the diaspora, with its deep historical roots, has been—and still is—one of the pillars of national identity and politics. But before moving on, I must acknowledge one major limitation in my approach. The Armenian diaspora is divided into two broad categories: "internal" and "external." The first is called "internal" because, until 1991, it consisted of communities outside Soviet Armenia but within the same overall state (i.e., the USSR); the second category—the "external"—covers the rest of the globe. It is the "Western" component of the "external" dimension that I examine in this article, while realizing that the roots of the current Western diaspora lie mostly in the Middle East. This emphasis is justified because the main homeland-diaspora political and cultural cleavages—in fact, the core ideas of the diasporan condition—are embodied in the "external" element. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the "internal" element is emerging as an increasingly important entity in its own right, but it has yet to be systematically researched and analyzed.

Theoretical Considerations The "classical" definition of diaspora emphasizes the forced dispersion of a clearly identified group of people from their homeland, with a distinct collective memory and a "myth" of return. The group maintains its collective identity by establishing and controlling boundaries around it, while maintaining communication with other similar communities and with the homeland.⁴ This restrictive definition is countered on the other extreme by Walker Connor's simple assertion that a diaspora is "that segment of a people living outside the homeland" (16). The first limits the definition to the historic "ideal type" cases of the Jews, the Armenians, the Greeks, and...

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London School of Economics and Political Science

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