

**Speech by
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Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora**

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In this conference of experts, I feel right at home. I am, by default, an expert on Diaspora. I was born in Syria, the heart of the Armenian Diaspora, came to the homeland for the first time as a Diasporan student -- and today, I am foreign minister of that homeland which has more of its nationals living in Diaspora, than at home.

I appreciate the fact that this panel is to tackle the challenges and opportunities of Transnational Identities. We are in fact transnational as a consequence of today's homeland-diaspora relationships. It is not just those living in diaspora who have this multiple identity, but it is also those in the homeland whose identity alters, ever so slightly even, because of the diaspora and its perceptions, expressions of who we are. I believe the opportunities that this new, multilayered, identity produces are greater than the challenges.

Diaspora is an old concept that has just come home, that has found itself. In these days of easy, quick and inexpensive air travel, easy, quick and inexpensive telephone calls, easy, quick and inexpensive internet access, being in Diaspora no longer means permanent disconnection, distance, inaccessibility and alienation from the memories and experiences of childhood, from a homeland and a home. Today Diaspora means an extension of the homeland – not a permanent dislocation, not a destructive dispersion, but life at a distance, that can even be beneficial.

On the one hand, the Armenian Diaspora experience is the archetypal example of diasporas. The very first studies of diaspora were quick to mention Armenians, Jews, and soon after the Africans, as the quintessential examples.

On the other hand, ours is not the traditional duality. Our history, our reality, and therefore, the diaspora-homeland relationship is more complex than that.

Let me explain. The Armenian Diaspora, historically, began as those who permanently left the traditional Armenian homeland. That's how the Armenian community of Lvov, Ukraine, and in Transylvania, were established in the 12th century. That's why there are thousands of Armenian graves throughout south and east Asia from Macao to Bangladesh. That is how it came to pass that that an Armenian translated the Bible into Chinese. That is why Martin the Armenian was living in the Plymouth Colony of Massachusetts in the 1600s. There were also those who left unwillingly, due to political circumstances. The Shah of Iran, in the 16th century, moved tens of thousands of

Armenian craftsmen, forcibly, to northern Iran. They lived there for hundreds of years, and left behind incredible historical, cultural, religious monuments.

Until the early 20th century, the Diaspora was the appendage, while most Armenians lived on the historic homeland, under some combination of Russian, Ottoman or Persian domination. It was the Genocide of 1915 that resulted in a mass exodus from the traditional homelands. The size of the Armenian Diaspora today is due largely to that wave of settlement. They were pushed out of their homes, and if they didn't die along the deportation route, then they made it to the countries of the Syrian desert. From there, they emigrated to Canada, to the US, and elsewhere. Today, the independent Republic of Armenia is based on the sliver of land that was under Russian, not Ottoman domination, and that managed to declare independence in 1918, consolidate as a political unit that then was absorbed into the Soviet Union as one of the 15 republics, and then emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union as an independent republic. The size of the Diaspora has grown during the last 20 years as a result of migration from the Soviet Armenian Republic, and until very recently, the independent Armenian Republic. Today's transnationals are this segment of diasporans – born into the USSR, resident in a third country, while feeling emotionally tied to the new, independent republic.

Thus, Armenians of the Diaspora have three sources of identity: 1. The host countries in which they live today; 2. the homeland I represent regardless of whether that was their place of origin or not, and 3. the country of origin – the place that offered refuge between the homeland and the host countries of today.

That is just one characteristic that makes our situation a bit unusual. The second is that our numbers are the opposite of the traditional balance – we have 5 million and more Armenians living outside Armenia, and 3 million in the homeland. Thus, the Diaspora is both larger, and older, than the homeland. The Diaspora is also not monolithic – There are 2 million Armenians in Russia, more than one million in North America. The experiences, capacities and expectations of these groups are very different. Yet, they are the same.

The impact of all this on the Armenia-Diaspora relationship is multilayered. Let me try to describe some of those layers, including economic ones, and then finally talk about the reality and the potential for homeland-diaspora relations in the context of political stability and peace.

First, we have multiple identities, not just dual identities. Our homeland, the host country, and our country of origin all have a place in our hearts. The networks, the experiences, the know-how, that come with intimate knowledge and deep contacts in three places is invaluable. From the perspective of the homeland, this means that we benefit from even greater contacts, ties and links. On the other hand, our foreign relations, our bilateral relations are sometimes complicated by the diverse and wide-ranging circumstances in those communities. This complication arises partly from the reality that we may be an old nation, but a very new nation-state. Our assumptions and actions are based on our

experiences as a nation. The nation-state is, for us, a new phenomenon, with new, unknown, rules.

Second, a Diaspora as old as ours is highly structured. For centuries, our communities have been forced to regulate their social and cultural life, and as a result, churches, organizations, political parties even have a long tradition of community self-governance, especially considering that this was a Diaspora whose homeland was not a sovereign state for most of its history. Therefore, having such structures and institutions with which the homeland can interact allows for more productive and predictable relations. At the same time, because the Diaspora is highly structured, new mechanisms for new kinds of interaction are difficult to create.

Third, you are a member of the Diaspora only when you say you are. In order to say you are, you must identify with the homeland which defines it. One wants to identify with that which is strong, beautiful, proud. Our Diaspora is no longer suffering or starving. Neither should Armenia be. A developing country, an emerging democracy – these are concepts difficult to understand. Armenia is no. 82 on the UN's Human Development Index – high by regional standards, but not high compared to most of the host countries. Canada is ranked fifth, for example. Diasporas want homelands in their image. The challenge is to channel that yearning in a way that brings the aspiration closer to reality, rather than leading to unfulfilled dreams and frustrations. It's the thin line between taking what you have for granted and having grandiose expectations. Diasporas cannot, should not, take for granted that which is happening in the home country. Those difficult processes of political and economic institutional development are not always transparent processes. And impatiently comparing them to the stable institutions in their host countries can/will doubtless produce dissatisfaction.

Finally, the size of the Diaspora leads to high expectations all around -- on the part of the Diaspora itself, the homeland and the international community. With such a large number of Armenians living abroad, and with most of them comfortable, professional and settled, it is easy to hope for investments in large numbers, generally massive and significant Diaspora involvement and engagement, and resettlement perhaps.

The Diaspora's charitable and philanthropic giving predates Armenia's independence. Refugees, survivors, living in the Middle East received help and assistance from the Western Diaspora throughout the 20th century. The Soviet Republic was the recipient of aid and know-how, especially in the cultural sphere. Then later, after the earthquake of 1988, professionals, young people, everyone pitched in to help. So, with independence, it was expected that this kind of engagement would continue in even more significant ways.

And it is true that there are large amounts of humanitarian assistance – from individuals and organizations – pouring in. I know that scholars like Khachig Tololyan and others are constantly trying to put numbers on this kind of assistance. I don't have them. But that kind of generosity and largesse is visible throughout the country. Renovated schools, improved infrastructure, educational and training programs, health care assistance – all made possible by donations from the Diaspora. The Diaspora's humanitarian engagement

is more visible, has quick impact and is easier to accomplish. The donor feels good, quickly, and is not overwhelmed or bound by long term obligations.

Individual remittances, too, continue to be significant for Armenia's economy. Funds sent regularly to families by individual Diasporans are often the difference between survival and destitution for many in the homeland. The numbers are very high – nearly half a billion dollars a year – but they are from individuals to individuals. They are indispensable for immediate relief. But not long-term sustainability.

It's economic investment that fuels long-term sustainability. Diaspora engagement in IT, tourism, diamond and jewelry production all have Diasporans at the other end of the network. The significance of this kind of networking is obvious.

The challenge for homelands is how to increase such high-impact participation. Helping the homeland in the humanitarian sphere is comparatively easy. The challenge is to find ways to use diaspora networks and know-how to bring in lasting cooperation, making it as satisfying as the easy, quick donation.

Now let me talk about homeland-diaspora relations in the context of political stability and peace. The Armenia example may be a bit extreme in that our foreign relations challenges are many. We live in a difficult neighborhood, and we are faced with problems that Armenia alone cannot solve. Our neighbors must want solutions as well. Therefore, Armenia's and Diaspora's maneuvering space is unusually limited. On the other hand, exactly because we live in a difficult neighborhood, where Russia, the US, Europe and other countries have very clear interests and agendas, the Diaspora factor has been critical.

If I can somewhat oversimplify and quickly summarize our foreign relations challenges in three key policy areas, the mostly complementary, sometimes differing views and needs of homeland and diaspora become clear.

1. On the Resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Armenians in Diaspora and Armenia see the opportunity to right a historic wrong.
2. On Genocide recognition, Armenians in Diaspora and in Armenia see the opportunity to right a historic wrong.
3. On relations with Turkey, again, in Diaspora and in Armenia, Armenians see the opportunity to right a historic wrong.

We agree with them. But as authorities responsible for people's security and prosperity, we also know that all three of these painful, complex challenges have to be resolved with the future in mind, not the past.

On the Nagorno Karabakh situation, we want a lasting resolution. That must be based on a respect of the Nagorno Karabakh population's right to self-determination, to choose their own future. It must be based on compromise by all parties. It must be based with an

eye to Europe where borders take on less importance as formerly acrimonious neighbors have found ways to live side-by-side in peace.

On genocide recognition, for Armenians in Armenia and Armenians in the Diaspora, there is no difference, although Turkey sometimes likes to project that there is. All Armenians are convinced that Armenians and Turks need genocide recognition by Turkey, in order to find closure for this still painful, still open wound. Armenians are able to distinguish between the perpetrators and today's government of Turkey. Armenia, and the Diaspora are willing and ready to enter into dialog with Turkey and Turkish society at all levels, without pre-conditions. We need and want, above all else, normal relations with our neighbor. For this to happen, Turkey will have to come to terms with its past.

The Diaspora has an important role to play in this process. They are largely the victims and the descendants of the victims. Yet Armenians are the ones extending their hands for dialog.

Unfortunately, Turkey has made give-and-take between our peoples and our states, impossible. In addition to the restrictions on speech, our borders remain closed. They are the only closed borders in Europe. Nor are there diplomatic relations between our countries. In other words, there are no opportunities for new experiences, new memories, new interactions to build up alongside the old. Instead, there is a lingering security concern about a neighbor that has not repudiated state violence.

These are the complex foreign relations issues that the Diaspora has the opportunity to explain. Diaspora involvement, albeit at a distance, in the resolution of these conflicts and in the search for lasting understanding is necessary and useful. It is a way for all of us to make the past work for the future.

Thank you.