

Who Should Contribute to *our* National Concerns?

Johny Messo (2004)

We have reached a crucial stage in our history. The majority of the present generation has been born and raised outside our traditional homelands. And everything that our forefathers had build up, all they had fought for and died for, every bit and piece they were able to protect of that what we retrospectively can call our 'national heritage' today; indeed, all that and more is presently at the crossroads of its ominous extinction, of becoming history soon.

Our common concerns

Today, there are so many questions for our people to be asked and answered. Hence it is not easy to decide what objectives should enjoy the highest priority. I believe that in order to secure our people with a bright future, our main focuses can be subdivided along three planes. Within these dimensions explicit objectives can be defined and formulated.

1. The preservation, consolidation, maintenance and extension of our national heritage; individuals, too, need to contribute their personal knowledge, ideas and resources.
2. The restructuralization, reorganization and unification of our people into a firm national unity accompanied with a new way of thinking (a spiritual renaissance, if you will), anticipating on the changed circumstances in the present reality of our Diaspora.
3. Though I personally detect stagnation rather than progression on the aforesaid two levels, prosperity and success is what we always should desire and strive for; not only *as individuals* in the different societies we live in, but more so *as a people* on the international level we ought to be engaged with *our* national concerns (as well).

Ad. 1.

Our national legacy simply stands for all the material and immaterial properties we have inherited from our ancestors. The *tangible* heritage is represented by our former lands, such as Tur 'Abdin, the birthplace of most of our (grand)parents, where we have left behind – perhaps even indifferently – many ancient homes, churches, monasteries, lands, vineyards, etc. Moreover, some of our national assets were even confiscated and taken from us. Have we really forgotten that we *still have* a sacred motherland where our ancestors have been buried in the preceding millennia? If we are aware of it, why do we consciously turn our back to it?

The *intangible* inheritance, on the other hand, stands for our Aramaic language, culture, traditions, customs and our faith; in fact, our complete inner being and essence. So true, a unique and wealthy inheritance built up over at least 3,000 years of history. Up till now, we still have not been granted any rights to safeguard all that nor to maintain our distinct identity in our homeland. How, in fact, have we shown that we cared, and still care, about our legacy?

We truly have arrived at an *irreversible* intersection. Either we choose to preserve all the parts of our legacy that still can be saved, or we neglect it and pass on a fractured heritage to our children. Our inheritance requires language academies, cultural organizations and research centres to safeguard, secure *and* add to it. The Beth Mardutho institute, founded by George Kiraz, is a good example; its projects deserve our full support. Alas, we lack such enterprises.

That is why the role of each Aramean individual is indispensable today. Before everything, we can aid projects economically. But there are examples which prove that a person can do more for his heritage than just supporting it financially. The key individual in this context is,

perhaps, the Syriac/Aramean student. Regardless of his academic background, he can always apply his field of expertise to matters concerning his people; a creative mind will even find opportunities to focus his school papers or dissertation on his identity.

Ad. 2.

Our cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity used to be intertwined with our religious identity. The Western countries by now have experienced the break up of each of these identity markers and, additionally, introduced a political one. Therefore, our identity has become subject to a still ongoing process of redefinition in the modern world.

Compared to the role the churches and the monasteries formerly performed in our homelands, our religious institutions have lost a lot of ground in the West to other independent aiding societies; another phase which the West has already passed. People are not so much dependent on specific religious bodies anymore as they used to be; though we do affirm that our religious identity is still more or less essentially part of our lives. For there is today the freedom to establish dozens of institutions, associations, foundations, organizations and other representative organs, which similarly can put their energy in religious and spiritual matters. Unambiguously (re)defining our identity is truly one of our major aims today.

If our *Eastern* Orthodox church wants to survive in the *West*, it has to understand and even accept the changed setting. Adapting itself to modern principles is a necessity; it has no other option. Thus, cooperation with the secular movements, especially with the cultural unions, of our people is a requisite. Combining their forces and dividing their common burdens should be a mutual desire and even a must. Particularly the protection of our Aramaic language in its spoken and written forms should be worked on. If we loose our mother language, we *all* (i.e. church, secular bodies and common people) will loose our identity soon, including our faith. Forgotten, hollow and even shallow identities simply foretell our national disappearance soon.

In our condition, we are in need of a transformation from the present circumstances. This can be deduced largely from the reality of the ‘minimum survival’ in the past few years of our whole organizational existence. Of our churches and organizations, I mean, who reflect in my view the heartbeat of our people. No new policies, strategies and governmental changes predict very dark clouds within a few years time. We have been able to do what was in our power the past few decades. Perhaps it is now time for a new and fresh generation to take up the current challenges in order to execute the necessary reforms and reorganization properly.

One personal observation I want to add in this context. I have noticed a weak mentality, a spirit that gives up the fight even before the first round of the battle has ended. Who am I talking about? To be honest, mainly about our intelligentsia. In the recent years, many of them have turned their back to our organizations and churches – few of their arguments are “It’s hard to work with *them*,” “I can’t realize *my* vision under such and such conditions” *et cetera*.

Thus, however sad, many have made themselves and their capabilities invisible and non-profitable for our people as such. It is my hope that instead of staying on the background, they present themselves on the foreground (again) and accept the challenges for reforms in order to realize and live their dreams; for it is *all* of us who either will benefit from them and their qualities or loose much if they choose to remain out of sight. They are not alone in this effort!

Now, not only the church, but also the secular organizations and individual idea-makers, cultural entrepreneurs with creative minds and intellect should participate in brainstorm

sessions aimed at how to achieve, for instance, our noble objective of national unity, wherein the roles of all parties is well explained, understood and accepted. But only when an intellectual rebirth of our people has been accomplished, which includes a change of heart and of mentality (surely big challenges in their own way and not to escape from either), we are able to realize national unity and subsequently we can also set up higher *common* goals.

Let us recall that the foundation of the modern state of Israel was laid down during assemblies that were held, starting in 1897. This first Zionist Congress was summoned by its later elected president, Theodor Herzl, who realized that the Jewish people essentially had to restructure themselves before everything; approximately 200 Jews from 17 countries gathered in the concert hall of the Basel Municipal Casino in Switzerland. In that very same year, Herzl, who died in 1904, prophetically declared in his diary: “At Basel I founded the Jewish State.”

The present writer believes that the need for international restructure of the Aramean people is currently more urgent than ever. On this level, too, we have arrived at a junction. The path we choose today, will determine our national destiny. So let us plan a congress where brilliant minds can gather and decide the right tracks to secure our common future. What the outcome will be, we cannot predict; but when we do nothing, the result has already been predicted.

In short, we need to evaluate our present organizational structures and scrutinize them well to see whether or not they can remain unaltered, should be adapted or that we should reorganize ourselves again according to the modern standards. We further need to organize ourselves in the West according to Western principles, as we formerly did in the East according to Eastern standards. So far so ‘good’, but as time causes changes, we have to anticipate on these changes. I really believe the time is *now* ripe for dedicated and intelligent individuals to step forward, accept the existing challenges and implement the necessary reforms to brighten our national future perspectives. (In a future publication I hope to return to the issue of the necessary need of a centralized governmental structure in our Diaspora reality.)

Ad. 3.

We have lived nearly one generation (say, 40 years) isolated from our traditional homelands. As I have just argued, we must adapt to changes, new situations and environments in order to survive. We should examine ourselves, therefore, to judge whether we have done all that.

One could boast, of course, that *materially* we have achieved quite a lot the past few decades. Let us recall that we have constructed many beautiful churches and some monasteries; we have consecrated clerics, teachers and boards to administer them besides the establishment of our cultural unions and political parties. Also, on a more *individual* level, many of us have fared well in the economic field (e.g., personal businesses like restaurants, companies, shops).

If we want to look forward, we should not fear to confront ourselves looking back on what we have accomplished so far and on what we have *not* carried out yet, but actually should have; yet I still sense the fear of self-evaluation among some of our organizations and churches. This concern is mainly applicable to the *immaterial* and *national* planes. For example, did our homeland also gain from our personal profits these past decades? Or, perhaps equally important, what have we actually achieved as regards our intangible national heritage and what *immaterial* or *international* progresses have we realized together *as a people*?

My point with stagnation and progression is basically as follows.

First and foremost, the serious, but too often neglected and underestimated problem of the name-issue causes a major impediment towards our national progression. This whole disagreement about a *national* name, for that is what the quarrel is quintessentially all about, has demanded a lot of our time and energy the past decades. It has distracted us too much and it still controls our mindset. Moreover, it keeps narrowing and clouding our visions for bettering our future. (In a forthcoming essay I will return to the name-issue more specifically.)

Second, *materially* most of us have more or less progressed *personally*. But *immaterially*, our ancient-old national heritage is on the very edge of its extinction; and this only within a few decades time. Besides, from my perspective we have not advanced much *as a people* since our exodus from our homeland. Hence, a lack of progress can be considered as stagnation.

Perhaps I should reflect the latter point through the so-called pyramid of Abraham Maslow. This American psychologist identified five human needs that motivate (personal) behaviour. As each level has been satisfied, a person continues to fulfil the second level until he has reached the fifth and highest point. They are consecutively numbered:

1. **Physiological:** The basic needs for survival, viz. shelter, food, water, warmth, air, etc.
2. **Safety and Security:** Protection from injury and harm as well as freedom from attack.
3. **Social and Love:** Seeking out relationships that provide affection, caring and belonging.
4. **Self-esteem:** The desire of respect, status and recognition from others.
5. **Self-Actualisation:** To develop our ultimate potential, to make a worthwhile contribution.

This scheme provides healthy food for our thoughts. Isn't it striking that *individually* most of us have reached up to the fifth point in Western countries, whereas *nationally* we have not even passed the first two levels (as already discussed above)? The basic needs for our national survival, essentially being the maintenance of our identity, are still weak and insecure. The protection of our present and future national well-being is far off too.

Thus arises again the question as to why so many among us avoid the battle that actually should be carried out by all of us *together*. We have, in addition to our discussion in 1 and 2, numerous matters to focus on. The question of the *Sayfo* (a.k.a. Genocide) is *still* a closed file. The issue of *still* not being recognized as the *indigenous* people in our factual homeland; and as such, we enjoy no rights whatsoever, *inter alia*, to preserve our heritage or to survive as a (distinct) people. There are lots of other crucial political questions on our 'national to-do list', all of which remain unanswered because not many, it seems, care to even ask about them.

One thing is certain. If we all join our capabilities and our strength and *just ask* about our national questions in diplomatic terms (the least we can do), then according to its standards the international community is obliged to provide us with answers. But not asking means no answers; and no answers mean no national survival, progression or success for us among the other nations – whether in Diaspora or, who knows, someday in our homeland again. Hence, those among us who are, say, still 'inactive' in this area, should ask themselves the *personal question* as to why they do not commit themselves to the neglected 'Aramean Questions', which are *still* lacking on the agendas of the international world leaders today.

National Awareness

Is my gloomy view for our future really that pessimistic? From the bottom of my heart I believe so. That is, *only* if things do not change soon. As I pointed out, *individually* we all can survive economically in the West and perhaps some of us can even maintain our heritage and pass it on to their children. (I wonder how many of them will succeed in doing the same) And

we even can solve our own personal affairs. Indeed, all *personal* matters we can deal with pretty well. However, what about our common future and our common destiny *as a people*?

Why should we act 'soon'? I think it is true that every time one of our older people dies, an invaluable segment of our heritage is buried with them in their graves. What is more, every time one of them departs from this life, not only a part of our very own identity dies with them and ceases to exist, but also a part of our own (grand)children. Secondly, due to our weak international organizational structure, perhaps in a few cases not nationally, we get alienated from each other day by day; Arameans in Sweden, for example, loose connections with those in Germany and so on (let's not start about the relationship between the Homeland & Diaspora!). So we have to act soon since time is one of our worst enemies today. "If not now, *when*?" would the ancient Jewish sages wisely reply to us. So the sooner, the better.

Really, time is bereaving us of our complete national heritage, of both the material and immaterial inheritance. In addition, time also causes each day more alienation (i.e., a basis for separation!) between our people in the different countries we live in. Beware! What time has taken away or corrupted, cannot be brought back. Thus, the existing wounds as well as the continuing estrangement from each other caused by time, would require an unforeseen long process of healing and restoration. Again, if we do not act now, *when* will we ever?

I further uphold the conviction that in order to accomplish changes, first of all we have to get rid of egocentric thoughts and Cain-like attitudes (Genesis 4:9 "Am I my brother's keeper?"). We should rather start thinking in terms of communality, solidarity and unity (this call should not be confounded with an appeal for 'communism'!). For we have to realize that *all of us* are part of *one unique body* in which we should care about each other, because we are all inexorably interconnected to each other. The insight of Saint Paul in spiritual affairs is perfectly well applicable to our national failure or success: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12:26)

One of our main aims is thus to persuade our people of the urgent need of *becoming a people or nation*, indeed *one body*. Currently we are, in my opinion, rather an *unorganized* group of people who have many things in common except the same ideas regarding their future survival; and, for that same matter, we neither share similar convictions concerning our past.

In other words, first of all we have to convince ourselves of the necessity of becoming a nation among the other nations in order to protect *our* national interests and questions. This process can possibly be incited with a better awareness of our distinct, but rich, identity in this world. Our common history, both the glorious parts as well as the painful ones like the *Sayfo*, should be carved in our minds. Maybe a stronger consciousness of our unique identity and our shared history can unite us in the plea for our national concerns, interests and goals.

I am also pondering if we really fail to see the ironical paradox of our own national status. Our parents were lamenting the lack of rights they enjoyed. And when we have the possibility to speak out against the countries that were constructed upon our ancient old national soil, we angrily ventilate our views stating that we have no rights (alluding that we do want them).

Today, however, the international community offers us plenty of rights, but it is rather us who do not claim them. The rights offered, differ from basic human rights to self-determination (the basis of becoming a nation!). Hence, we can only blame ourselves for denying our very own rights to exist: we are relinquishing our own future and even that of our (grand)children.

I am aware that everything is written quite abstractly; detailed analyses have been avoided. Nevertheless, we have to start somewhere and plans and policies, which this writer hopes to have stimulated the reader to become more engaged in, have their origin on papers first. I truly hope others will join me in our twofold task of (a) accepting the challenges ahead us to execute the proper reforms within our current organizational reality, and (b) simultaneously persuading our own friends and families before everything with the ‘national thought’ in order to get their minds and hearts focused on our very own national interests and destiny (too).

Through this process of brainstorming and initiatives to develop new projects, we have to encourage ourselves never to give up hope. We have to avoid individuality as well as the lack of interest in our *common* cause and destiny. We simply *have to* care about it. If we do not care about ourselves, no one else will! Further, we should not be imprisoned by illusionary thoughts that we can survive as individuals, for we can *only* live on if we stick together and join our forces and capabilities. Therefore, we need to create a strong awareness of our identity accompanied with thinking in terms of *collective* and even *national* problems, interests, objectives rather than considering them all as personal or individual issues.

I further reiterate the urgent need for an international conference to discuss our national questions officially. This should be taken seriously and organized soon; the sooner the better.

In Holland they have a saying, which goes like this: “A better milieu starts with yourself.” Now, if just each individual starts offering his own contributions to any of our *national* objectives, the input would certainly become tangible. For we have learned with St. Paul that a body’s beauty or corruption depends upon the success or failure of its individual limbs.

And so, my fellow Arameans, I conclude this brief essay, written in a humble but hopeful spirit to have excited more people to engage themselves in our national issues too, in a similar vein as John F. Kennedy’s appeal to the American people at his inaugural address in 1961: Ask not what your people can do for you; *ask what you can do for your people.*