

**SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF YOUTH REPATRIATION TO THE RA  
(THE CASE OF ARMENIANS FROM ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN; “PARSKAHAYS”)**

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# **SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF YOUTH REPATRIATION TO RA (THE CASE OF ARMENIANS FROM ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN; “PARSKAHAYS”)**

## **Abstract**

The main flows of repatriation to Soviet Armenia took place in 1920, 1946-48, and 1962-1973, as a result of which more than 200,000 ethnic Armenians returned to Soviet Armenia. Another flow of immigration was observed in post-Soviet period, though with changing intensity, which was quite different by its content, circumstances and implementation mechanisms. Thus, the term of repatriation in latter case should be discussed separately.

This paper presents the historical background of the abovementioned flows and discusses the characteristics of the last flow, presenting some quantitative (statistical) data. Some aspects of young repatriates' participation in Armenia's socio-cultural and public spheres are also discussed.

The data gathered from RA public administration bodies, other printed materials and quantitative data collected serve as empirical basis of the paper.<sup>1</sup>

## **Historical Background**

Until now, repatriation has been defined as the return of Armenians living abroad to their historical motherland and acquiring Armenian citizenship.<sup>2</sup> In this sense the main flows of repatriation are considered to be the ones in 1921-36, 1946-49, 1962-82, during which more than 200,000 Armenians returned to Soviet Armenia. The flow of 1946-49 is considered to be the best organized and the most effective one. After World War II the government of the Soviet Armenia initiated a mass immigration of Armenians from the Diaspora (*Spyurkahayer*). A committee was created, which had a mission to organize the repatriation of Armenians from abroad and their venue to the Soviet Armenia. Moreover, the Committee of Resettlement had to deal with issues of distribution of repatriates, arrange their housing and take care of other needs. They also built new settlements and houses for the repatriated people.

Thus, the biggest flow of repatriation took place from Iran, which was mainly attributable to the large number of Armenian population in Iran and hard living conditions there. Before World War II 110.000 Armenians lived in Iran, 115.000 in 1950, and the number exceeded 200.000 in 1979, by the times of the revolution. Consequently, the Iranian Armenians began to emigrate from the country in large numbers, as a result of the hard socio-economic and

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<sup>1</sup> 18 In-depth interviews were conducted by the authors in February-March, 2006 with 16-35 years old Armenians and members of their families who had moved to RoA from Islamic Republic of Iran. The respondents were selected taking into consideration their aim to settle down in Armenia, and the fact that they had been living in Armenia for the last 3-5 years. There has been kept the gender, age representatives, and also representatives from three main towns of Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia, Book 6.

political situation created by the Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraqi war. In 1970s 95% of Iranian Armenians were urban residents living mainly in Tehran, Ispahan and Tabriz.

The repatriation was organized on the state level. However, some problems emerged with settlement, distribution and employment of repatriates. Being urban residents, repatriates refused to live in rural areas and wanted to live mainly in Yerevan. The Iranian Armenians of 1946 repatriation were settled in Sissian, Goris and Ghapan (currently Syunik) Regions. The ones of 1963-80 were settled in Leninakan (now Gyumri), Charentsavan, Abovyan, Masis, Ararat, Ashtarak, Ejmiadzin and Hoktemberyan (now Armavir), other cities in Armenia. The climatic conditions of the abovementioned cities proved not to be comfortable for them, since they were used to living in hot areas of Iran, which gave rise to many complaints. Besides, the relatives and different members of the families were settled in different (and far) areas, which made the process of adaptation to the new environment even more difficult. This was yet another reason for complaints, since the repatriates ended up living far from their previous social and cultural relationships.

The separation from the previous social relationships and cultural ties caused additional complexes among repatriates and destroyed the social-cultural inclusion. Language (mainly dialects), sub-ethnic psychological and behavioral differences and sometimes incompatibilities put additional obstacles in the way to assimilation<sup>3</sup>. These problems resulted in decrease of repatriation, and brought about the opposite process, their immigration back to Iran.

## **Contemporary Phase**

A new wave of Armenians' return to Armenia was observed in Post Soviet period, which was different from the previous ones by its content, circumstances and implementation mechanisms. This new wave should not be considered "repatriation" in its traditional sense (see the definition above), but instead, taking into account its magnitude and juridical aspects, it should be considered as activation of ethnic Armenian people's movement to Armenia, and their long-term settlement in the RA. Besides, in contrast to the previous definition, which primarily emphasized the legal implementation mechanisms (changing citizenship), when defining this new wave of immigration, one should consider the conscious purpose of settlement in Armenia for a long-term period as a primary criterion.

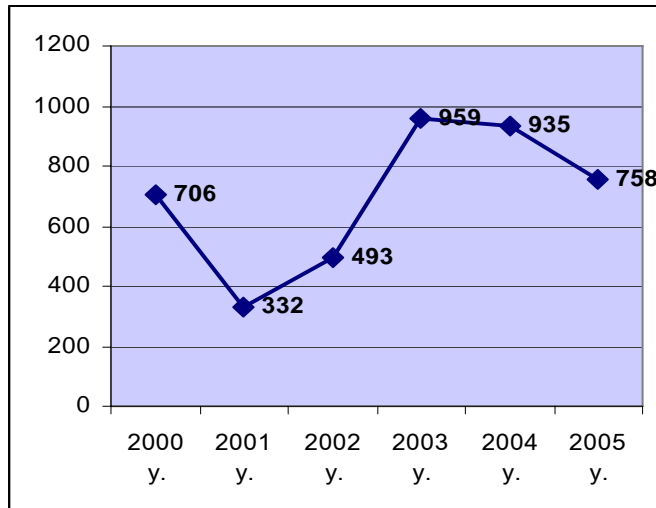
Though there is not enough statistical data, however, it could be mentioned that most of the repatriated Armenians came from Middle East, especially from Islamic Republic of Iran

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<sup>3</sup> H.U. Meliksetyan, "Motherland Diaspora Relations and Repatriation of 1920-1980", Yerevan, 1985

(hereinafter referred also as Iran). Thus, 5500 Armenian citizens of Iran have received special residency status since 1996 (The RA Law on the Juridical Status of Foreign Citizens in the Republic of Armenia, passed in 1994, and that is the reason there has been no registration conducted until 1996).

The distribution by years of the people receiving the Special Residency Status is presented in the graph below<sup>4</sup>



The empirical data gathered from various social groups of 16-35 years old “Persian Armenians-*Parskabayer*”<sup>5</sup>, living in Armenia during the last 3-5 years, allows us to say that their motivation to move to Armenia is connected mainly with a new understanding and image of “Motherland”. Even though admitting that historically the borders and contents of “Motherland” were different, they considered Republic of

Armenia as “Motherland”. One of our respondents as a reply to the question “why” said “*What a question you ask? It is the same as you ask Christian people why they go to Church!*”. Another relevant folk expression is the joke about Persian Armenians, who come back from working migration (“*Khopan*” in Armenian) to Iran they went for 400 years ago<sup>6</sup>.

Nowadays, more than 80000 Armenians live in Iran<sup>7</sup>. The community is stratified: there are many craftsmen, workers, and highly qualified specialists (architectures, engineers, physicians and teachers), entrepreneurs and commissioners. Currently, there is a wave of emigration of Iranian Armenians to the USA, and the Republic of Armenia as well. The reasons of the process are the political and social-economic conditions of the country and also religious limitations, which bring about complaints, mainly among the youth. Those who moved to Armenia mention that the decision to move to Armenia was caused by the fact that the language spoken in Armenia is comparably more similar and closer to their heart, and so is cultural and religious environment. Additionally, there are sufficient preconditions for young people for their future self-expression, and development.

<sup>4</sup> Department of amnesty, rewards and titles of the administration of the President of RoA

<sup>5</sup> NOTE: this is how we called ethno-graphically to mention those Armenians in Islamic Republic of Iran. The term of “*Iranahay*” also may be observed) of 16-35 years old with the aim to have a long-term settlement in Armenia

<sup>6</sup> NOTE: This is about mass resettlement of Armenians to Iran at Shah Abbas times.

<sup>7</sup> Encyclopedia of Armenian Diaspora, Yerevan 2003

As it was mentioned, though in general there is tolerance toward Armenians in Iran, and they have high status in Iranian society, Armenians somehow feel alienated. As one student mentioned (moved to Armenia when she was 9 years old), she was surprised and delighted when she discovered that *“you are free in Armenia, you may go along the street freely singing, which you can not do in Iran”*.

**The following phases of “Parskahays”** movement to Armenia can be identified:

Immediately after 1991 “Parskahays” visited Armenia mainly as tourists, having a desire to learn more about Armenia and its culture. Usually, they came with families. The most “courageous” of them (several families, mainly related to the activities of Armenian Revolutionary Alliance political party, which has influence among Armenians in Iran) settled in Armenia and obtained real estate, sold their apartment in Iran, set up a private business or got a stable job in Armenia. The main motivation for those people was “patriotism”, and they were determined to take the chance to live in regained motherland, even despite the existing hardships.

In 1993-1994 the “immigration” temporarily ceased due to the Political and hence the social-economic hard situation in Armenia. The vast majority of those who moved in 1995 are students, who came to study in Armenian universities. Step by step their families have been following them.

The intensity of immigration of Iranian Armenians to the Republic of Armenia started to increase after 2000. One of the major stimuli of the process was the declaration of Motherland-Diaspora relationship as a priority for the State and various processes and mass events following it, e.g. Pan Armenian Games and Armenia-Diaspora conferences. Stabilized social-economic and political situation in Armenia during the recent years was yet another incentive. Besides, the “multiplying effect” worked, i.e. people already settled in Armenia agitated their relatives and acquaintances to move there too and supported them.

### **Soviet and Post-Soviet Repatriates**

Current resettlement of Armenians from Iran to Armenia has the following differences compared to the Soviet period repatriation

- The current resettlement is not planned and administrated from a center.
- It is chaotic and gradually developing.
- It is not motivated by any administrative and powerful PR campaign.
- Opportunities for primary visits and preparatory activities exist.

- Resettled people are free to choose the place to live (they generally choose the central parts of Yerevan, mainly Small Center and the Berekamutyun Metro surroundings, as well as “Komitas” district) and their occupation. Those who have sufficient financial resources and intention to do so, buy/build houses in the places from where the mountain Ararat can be viewed. There is also some tendency to form so-called small districts (mostly just buildings) of “*Parskahays*”, such as the building on the cross of the Saryan and Amiryan streets in Yerevan.
- Now more prosperous people with sufficient financial resources move to Armenia.

Apart from the above-mentioned differences, another specific characteristic exists, namely that this movement can be considered as “youth movement”, since it is supported and/or implemented by and in favor of young people, which began the resettlement by getting admitted to universities in Armenia. There are also many families who are here in Armenia, because they have joined their “child” (student) in Armenia, or have come to Armenia after the arrival of the student.

### **Educational Sphere**

Before discussing the problems and obstacles of the immigrant high school students in Armenia, the characteristics of school system in Iran should be briefly presented. Generally, Armenians prefer to go to Armenian schools in Iran, where, like in any other school in Iran, students are separated by their gender. In Armenian schools students have lessons of Armenian language, history and literature (taught with “Mesropian” orthography), the other courses are taught in Iranian language. Different levels of knowledge of the Armenian language, as well as different orthographies cause inconvenience both for the immigrants and the schools they attend in the RA. Incompetence of Russian language is also a problem for them, which some “*Parskahays*” solve by learning Russian with the help of private teachers. However, in general they encounter the second problem only in Higher Education system. One other problem observed was that some young “*Parskahay*” girls, studying in a class together with boys, did not feel at ease for the first period. Despite the mentioned problems, and especially for those who manage to overcome them, and finish the school in Armenia, the process of integration in the Armenian society (they call it “*Hayastanyan society*”) passes more effectively and they consider themselves as its full member.

As it was previously mentioned, students constitute a large part of “*Parskahay*” youth in Armenia. Furthermore, the number of those who get higher education in Armenia is increasing. For example, the number of “*Parskahay*” students has increased more than twice in 2004

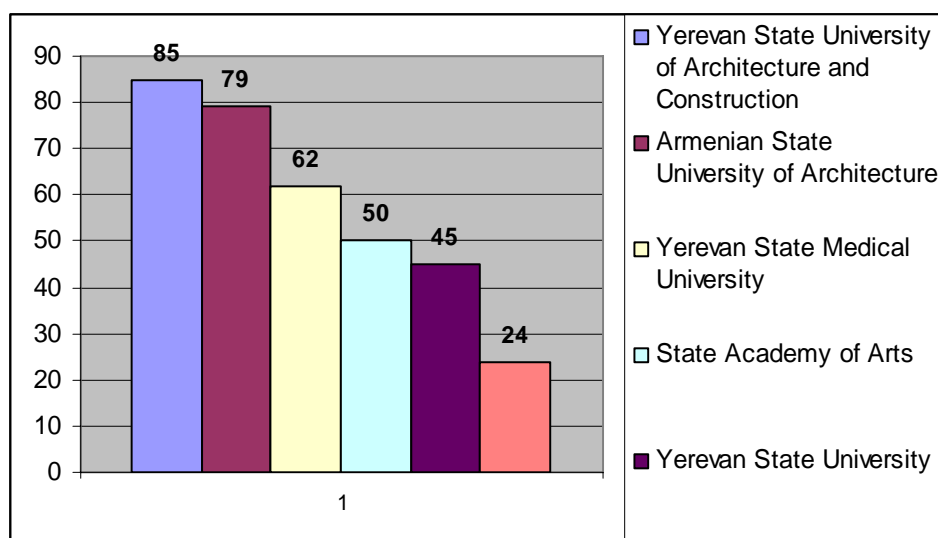
compared to 2000 (246 students in 2004 and 103 students in 2000). In the years of 2005/2006 among 2960 Armenian students from the Diaspora (*Spyurkahay*) 455 were from Iran.<sup>8</sup> Some of the reasons underlying this trend are the following:

- It is becoming more and more difficult for people of other nationality to be admitted in Higher Educational Institutions (hereinafter referred as HEI) in Iran.
- Sometimes, HEI they manage to get admitted to is located in farther parts of the country and they have to live and study in those distant parts. This causes additional problems, especially for females.

Young people came to Armenia, because it is their “Homeland”. Moreover, language barriers are much lower in Armenia, and social-cultural, as well as relative-friendship ties already exist in this country, which are of great support to them. This plays significant role in making their decision to immigrate. Businesses are established to organize the students’ arrival, admission in the HEI-s and living in Armenia, which is also very helpful for the applicants to Armenian HEIs and another incentive for making the decision to pursue their studies in Armenia, as many respondents mentioned.

The selection of the certain HEI and specialty is also caused by several objective circumstances. Since 2003 the diplomas of the following HEI-s are officially accepted in Iran; Yerevan State University, Medical University, Armenian State University of Architecture, Yerevan State Conservatory, and State Linguistic University of V. Bryusov. Before that only the Yerevan State University of Architecture and Construction was officially accepted in Iran.

The distribution of Armenian students from Iran in the RA HEI-s in 2005/2006 is presented in the chart below.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup> Department of international relations and relations with Diaspora, Ministry of Education and Science, RA

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In other HEI-s the number of Armenians from Iran is not more than 10. Eighty students study in the RA Private HEI-s, and 11 in Vocational Education System.

Foreigners are admitted in the RA State HEI-s only by payment system, furthermore the price for them is higher than for the RA citizens.

As it has already been mentioned, incompetence in Russian language is a serious problem in the studying process, which causes obstacles especially in terms of access to professional literature in Russian language.

Many students who graduate from the HEI-s in Armenia and decide to stay in Armenia afterwards can be considered “repatriates”.

### **Employment**

Several patterns of the selection of employment and occupation are presented here.

Those who have decided to stay and live in Armenia are not able to be included in the Public Administration system because of legal regulations. Besides these jobs are not considered to be valuable or prestigious, and they usually offer low salaries. So, repatriates prefer to set up their own business, mainly in service sector, commerce and construction. Working in international organizations and private companies is also widespread. Some “*Parskahay*” owners prefer to have employees, who are also “*Parskahay*”, as they are assumed “*to work better*”. This fact is also explained by the desire of the “*Parskahay*” owners to help other “*Parskahays*”.

### **Leisure time**

In Iran the leisure time of young Armenians interviewed is organized mainly within the framework of the Armenian Communal life, and sometimes also political party organizations. Thus, they are affected by these organizations and their values, which leave them somehow separated from the Iranian youth. In Armenia their concept of leisure is being changed, and films, theatres, concerts are slowly integrating into their lives. The communal style of leisure time spending is also gradually moving on to Armenia. As the respondents mentioned, there are some cafes, restaurants, discotheques and other places, which many “*parskahays*” or “*spyurkahays*” are used to going to. The patriotic, sport and cultural (national Armenian, religious) events are less intensive compared to the ones in Iran.

## Public and Civic Activities

Respondents consider their political-civic life less intensive and active in Armenia, as compared to that in Iran, as they took part mainly in Armenian Communal events, which had stressed patriotic-national and sometimes political orientation.

They do not know any political party in Armenia except Armenian Revolutionary Alliance Political Party, which is familiar to them from their life in Iran. Thus, some of them prefer to continue to be involved in the Party or participate in the events it organizes. In 2004 “*Spyurkahay*” representatives of Student Councils in Universities formed the “Inter-university Council of “*Spyurkahay*” Students” NGO, which currently has 9 members. On the other hand, this idea is not encouraged by some of them, since they believe it can potentially support the isolation of “*Spyurkahays*”.

Not having a right to take part in elections, at least on the level of Local Self Government (hereinafter referred as LSG) is considered to be an obstacle: “*If one lives for more than 10 years in Armenia, why should he or she not have a chance to participate in the communal problem solution through LSG Body elections?*”, one of the respondents commented. However, it should be mentioned that this issue is already solved by the Changes to the RA Constitution adopted on November 27, 2005.

The practice of applying for the RA citizenship is not widely spread among “Parskahays”. Supposedly, the main reason is the expected adoption of dual citizenship. Another reason is that they have relatives and other ties in Iran, and Iranian citizenship facilitates traveling to Iran. In general it is preferred to get the Special Residency Status for 10 years in case of non-students, and students get Temporary Residency Status for 1 year, which provide them with sufficient rights and opportunities to live and work in Armenia.

## Family Life

Moving to Armenia and accepting the new environment and some of the local values and norms, they also bring social-cultural elements- behavioral and value models, which even in this new environment seldom undergo changes. These elements mainly refer to the family life and relationships. Generally, the family life is a comparably stable element in socio-normative culture and it usually changes slowly, keeping its traditionalism. In a new cultural environment, it takes the function of identity preservation and expression. This can be observed also among “parskahay” young men, when issues of relationships and contacts rise in the new environment. Those issues arise from the differences and “*wrong items and models*” of “*local-Armenian*” society (“Hayastanyan” in Armenian), so they sometimes prefer to keep “*theirs*” rather than adopt the

“local” relationship patterns. For example, in relationship between marital partners and also in relationships between parents and children, the role equality is highly valued by “*parskahays*”. This is seen as an opposite in “Armenian –Hayastanyan” families, where the relationship model is considered to be based on the overestimation of men’s role.

The other stable element is the festival-ceremonial system. Specifically, they continue not only to keep the Holidays they were used to celebrate in Iran, but also the way they celebrate the common holidays is different and they rarely change it, believing that “hayastantsis” celebrate them not “*actively and traditionally*” enough. Both usual and ceremonial cuisine is also kept the same as in Iran. The menu is not changed, however, some new elements are added sometimes (e.g. some sorts of salads, “*blinchiks*” etc.).

### **Values, Attitudes, Intentions and Possibilities**

We can see different value systems even within different subgroups in the “*Parskahay*” youth group. More evident differences are present between the groups of “Parskahays” coming to Armenia before and after 2000.

The first group considers their decision to come Armenia more conscious and based on their personal values, and integrates to the local society more easily. Besides, having been in Armenia during “*those hard social-economic times for Armenia*” and “*having shared*” the hardships with “*Hayastantsis*”, helps them to identify themselves with the local society members. They do not try to communicate with only (or mainly) “*parskahays*” and have more “local” friends.

More stable, critical and apposite attitudes towards the local society’s values and norms is more often met within the group of “Parskahay” young men having moved to Armenia after the 2000. And as there are “many parskahays now”, they sometimes do not need any other “local” people to communicate and spend free time with. This tendency in its turn brings about the opposite trend- “locals” consider them as a separate group. This fact, of course, can sometimes cause insufficient public dialogue between these two “culturally different” groups and slow down the integration process.

The value and perceptions of the terms “Motherland”, “patriotism”, “Armenianism” is considered to be quite different for “*parskahays*” (Diasporian Armenians - “*spyurkahay*”, in general) and “*hayastantsis*”. This seems to be objective and reasonable, if we take into consideration that they have socialized in a Diaspora environment, with active Armenian Communal life, where ethnic identity preservation and transmission have been among first priorities for parents in the process of upbringing of their children. From this point of view they do not see the abovementioned values appreciated in Armenia among “*hayastantsi*” young men,

which sometimes cause misunderstanding between them. Besides “Parskahays” do not understand and/or value many “Soviet” cultural elements which are still present in Armenian society.

Nevertheless, “*parskahay*” people have more potential to overcome the obstacles for the full inclusion in the new society than any other people from the Diaspora. First, it is caused by the comparably similar language of “*parskahayer*” and “*hayastani hayeren*”, both of them being Eastern Armenian. Second, Soviet Armenian and Iranian cultures are comparably closer that of many other countries. Third, Iran is a neighboring country and people have had more chances to communicate by visiting each other or sharing information. Fourth, as a result of previous mass repatriation flows from Iran, Iranian Armenians have more relatives and other personal contacts in Armenia, and this “social network” is a crucial factor in migration processes.

The abovementioned factors, as well as initiation of a public dialogue, can easily ensure cooperative functioning of different groups of Armenians within their Historical Motherland and motivate young people from Iran to live, work, make families and build their future in Armenia.