

Armenians split over who belongs to the 'diaspora'

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Minister Hagopyan arrived in Turkey on Thursday to participate in the Global Summit of Women, a conference held in Istanbul.

The granting of an award to Armenian intellectuals from Istanbul by Armenia's diaspora minister has sparked a global debate among the prominent members of the Armenian community over what constitutes the "diaspora."

Some of the figures who received awards Sunday objected to being considered part of the diaspora since they reside in their ancestors' native lands.

"It is unacceptable to define people residing in their homelands as 'diaspora,'" historian Ara Sarafyan, the director of the Gomidas Institute in London, told the Hürriyet Daily News on Monday, criticizing both the Armenian government and the people who received the awards.

"First of all, I would like to ask why those people who accepted the awards while maintaining their critical stance avoided pointing out during the ceremony the fact that they did not constitute a diaspora because [their ancestors] had been living in their own homelands for thousands of years," Sarafyan said.

"I would [also] like to ask just how much Armenia recognizes and understands the Armenians of Istanbul who represent the milestone of worldwide Armenian culture," he added.

Vahakn Karakashian, the editor-in-chief of Horizon newspaper in Canada, agreed that the 50,000-strong Armenian community in Istanbul should not be considered part of the diaspora, adding that Armenians have historical treasures in the area. But Karakashian said Diaspora Minister Hranush Hagopyan's initiative to award the Istanbul Armenians was still very well placed and worthy of recognition.

"It seems Armenia is making an effort to build some bridges. Our intellectuals' criticism must be regarded as but only a small reprimand," said writer, academic and linguist Sevan Nishanyan, a Turkish Armenian, who also affirmed Hagopyan's positive intentions.

"We can say that Istanbul Armenians are a de facto diaspora, but if they were Diyarbakır or Malatya Armenians, no one could argue that they are diaspora," said Harout Ekmanian, a journalist from Aleppo, Syria. "However, I wonder if the attitude of Istanbul Armenians toward the word 'diaspora' might also be a result of the demonization of the Armenian diaspora in the daily discourse for decades in Turkey."

Minister Hagopyan arrived in Turkey on Thursday to participate in the Global Summit of Women, a conference held in Istanbul. She presented 15 intellectuals from Istanbul with gold medals at a special reception hosted by the Turkish Armenian Patriarchate on the last day of her visit.

"It could have been any minister from Armenia, but I would not have preferred a diaspora minister to have come to Turkey. Where I live now is where I have lived for thousands of years ; I am no diaspora. This is a terrible irony," Mıgırdiç Margosyan, one of the award recipients, told the Daily News shortly before the ceremony.

"We are where we need to be, and we continue paying our debt to this land," said Garo Mafyan, a highly influential figure in Turkish pop music, making the same argument as Margosyan.

Journalist Ekmanian also criticized the diaspora minister for the limited scope of her role. “Apparently, her only duty is limited to giving medals, honoring diaspora notables and organizing conferences and summer camps that could only be used as materials for the state TV evening news, with no long-term benefit for the diaspora participants or the Armenian state,” Ekmanian said.

A freelance journalist from Armenia, Ani Hovhannesiyan, also said she understood quite well the attitude of the Istanbul Armenians but thought the criticism was overblown.

“I hope Turkey’s political stance toward the diaspora is not a factor behind this attitude,” she said.

Sources

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