

# Crisis Without Borders

## The Media in the Middle East

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

In the old days, when things looked bleak in the Diasporan communities of the West, everyone looked to the Middle East for hope. There, Armenians spoke, read, wrote Armenian. There, the future of the language and the culture was guaranteed.

Today, publishing Armenian newspapers in the Middle East is basically "a national obligation" passed from one generation to another," says Mardiros Balayan, publisher of the Cairo-based *Chahagir* bi-weekly, established in 1948 as the organ of the Social Democratic Hnchakian Party.

The editors and publishers of the six existing Armenian newspapers in Lebanon and Egypt confirm Balayan's characterization. While many of the problems and difficulties faced by Armenian publishers in the Middle East are local in nature, to a large extent their situation is not much different from virtually all publications in the Diaspora. What keeps these newspapers afloat is the financial and human resources of the political parties each represents. At least for now, their survival hinges on the willingness of a given party to preserve the "legacy" of their "founding fathers." More than a forum for discourse, these newspapers have become a litmus test of survival in a changing Diaspora.

Armenian-language newspapers in the Middle East have to deal with three major, perennial problems:

The first is shockingly new for the Middle East: a lack of readers. There is a steady and alarming decline of Armenian readers. Even in Lebanon—once considered the "Mother of Diasporas"—Arabic and English have become the preferred languages among the youth.

"Our fundamental problem is that there are no readers," says Seta Krikorian, a journalist contributing to *Aztag*, the ARF daily in Lebanon, established in 1927.

Garbis Yazjian, the chief executive of the Cairo-based *Arev* (of the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party, the Ramkavars) attempts a description of those who do read the party papers. "If we are going to answer this question honestly, it is not pleasant," he says. "It is the older generation that reads the paper; perhaps only 20 percent of the new generation simply flips through the pages. At best, they look at the sports section or the announcements. Probably, the copies we send to other countries are more thoroughly read than the ones we distribute here in Egypt."

Dikran Jimbashian, acting editor of *Aztag*, describes a typical reader of his paper, "I would say the typical reader is a middle aged person, with limited education, but who reads and writes Armenian. A person who generally does not read Arabic or foreign papers because of lack of knowledge of other languages, so they read *Aztag* to get both national and international news. These are our most loyal readers."

Krikorian adds, "Below the age of 50, people read specific sections that interest them." She explains, "We have people who just buy the paper for the crossword puzzle. We have people who read only the horoscope section. Young people mostly read the sports section only."

All publishers concur on the profile of the "Armenian Reader" today. Baruyr Aghbashian, editor of *Arev's* Beirut affiliate, *Zartonk*, (established in 1938) laments that, "Large number of Armenians in Lebanon go to non-Armenian schools. Even the so-called community leaders do not send their kids to Armenian schools. There is a whole generation of Armenians who do not speak Armenian."

The Lebanese-born Aghbashian, who is a graduate of Yerevan State University, is concerned about the long-term implications of the current trend. "I have difficulty seeing who will replace me as editor or writer," he says. "We don't pay well to attract new writers. Sometimes we teach in several schools to make a living and that certainly does not provide an attractive career choice for the new generation. The new generation is much more successful in mainstream Lebanese society than in the Armenian community."

Jimbashian shares Aghbashian's concern. "*Aztag's* biggest problem right now is that there are not enough writers. We don't have intellectuals who are capable of writing, analyzing and presenting local, regional and international issues in Armenian. Sadly, this pertains to all



professions, not only to the media," he says.

In Egypt, the lack of readers and writers is not the only problem. There is also a lack of Armenian typesetters. The typesetting of both *Chahagir* and *Arev* is done by Egyptians whose mother tongue is Arabic. *Chahagir's* 55-year-old office boy cum typesetter has been preparing the newspaper for publication for 28 years by character recognition. He has even learned the rules of hyphenation of the Armenian language without ever learning to speak, write or read Armenian. Recently, he has also learned to typeset on a computer by learning an Armenian keyboard.

Beyond a lack of readers—and the economic and administrative implications of that problem—there are the financial limitations placed on these newspapers. All of them operate on a bare-bones budget with lots of volunteer and dedicated help. All six papers are subsidized either by their parties or through individual sponsors. None of them are financially self-sufficient. Indeed, most of the small pool of writers in Armenian newspapers hold several other jobs to make ends meet because their newspapers cannot afford paying them "normal" salaries, as Aghbashian noted. However, there are some interesting exceptions. For example, the Egyptian writers who contribute to *Arev's* monthly Arabic supplement are paid three times more than the Armenian contributors to the same Arabic edition.

The third problem—a lack of organizational infrastructure—is a direct consequence of the newspapers' financial difficulties. The Armenian media in the Middle East "does not have a sophisticated or advanced organization for gathering, writing and publishing information and news," say *Aztag's* Krikorian. "With the limited number of staff, it takes us two days to work on a story and that's already late for a daily newspaper," she explains.

None of the six newspaper have full-time correspondents who cover community events, regional or international developments. At best, they have a few freelance or part-time writers who voluntarily contribute reports or articles, some receiving small honoraria.

Other than *Aztag*, which is 10 pages daily, the rest are four-page newspapers with regular sections on general and community news, sports and culture. While the number of printed and distributed copies of each newspaper is either a "party secret" or very hesitantly revealed by the publishers, the overall range is 500-3000 copies. A large number of copies are sent and distributed in Syria, where there are no local Armenian newspapers, except the *Gandsasar* monthly published by the Armenian Prelacy in Aleppo.

Bebo Simonian, whose articles regularly appear in various newspapers, is also a former principal and currently an instructor in Armenian schools in Beirut. He puts it more bluntly, "Today, the editors and publishers of the Armenian print media, instead of commissioning original articles to those who are capable of writing, prefer the scissors—they simply cut out and use already printed material from other publications." His observation holds true for almost all newspapers in the Diaspora. "Today, our newspapers are generally reprints of news and articles published elsewhere—basically a mission of recycling," says Simonian. Worse, "Articles are reprinted in several papers

without regard to copyright or honorarium to the author," he complains.

The problem is not unique to the Armenian-language print media. A survey of Armenian weeklies published in North America presents an even grimmer picture. The overwhelming percentage of the newspaper content is simply the print version of what appears on the Internet, such as the popular Groong network, and the rest is uncritical, at times unedited, reprints of news releases sent by community organizations and individuals. Other than the occasional editorials and opinion columns, there is no original or serious reporting.

So pervasive is this practice that readers assume that is the norm, and when publications such as AIM adhere to the internationally accepted practice of not reprinting any press releases, the senders are sometimes shocked, even hurt.

Still, most newspapers live by this method. The *Armenian Reporter International* even runs a regular note to readers asking them to alert the editors when a submission is both faxed and e-mailed, in order to "save us the unnecessary effort of preparing duplicate stories for publication."

The sophistication of the Internet is such that Armenian language publications, too, can benefit from the new technologies. Several Internet-based agencies such as Armenpress, Noyan Tapan (Armenia), *Asbarez*, *Horizon*, *Massis* (Los Angeles), *Gamk* (Paris) and *Marmara* (Istanbul) provide ready-to-print articles and news daily, most of it for free, to anyone who has a computer. These Internet services have made life easier for editors in the Middle East, and elsewhere.

The majority of these articles are on Armenia. And as Simonian points out, "The independence of Armenia caused an ideological crisis in the Diaspora." The political changes in Armenia in the late 1980s and the internal upheavals of the mid-1990s have had a lasting impact on the relatively stable internal life of the Diaspora and continue to shape the "national agenda."

However, even as editors agree that Armenia and Karabakh remain the focal point of Armenian national life around the world today, news on Armenia is not in great demand as it was just a few years ago, and today Armenia news is moved to the inside pages, unless it is major news.

Now that the Cold War is over, the newspapers in the Middle East tend to be "less ideological and more informational," says Aghbashian. On the other hand, almost all the papers practice political correctness when it comes to local Armenian community affairs. "Respect" for individual and organizational sensibilities, especially if the individual is a leader, takes precedence over the collective interests of the community. As for skirmishes between the political parties, *Aztag's* Jimbashian says, "It is our policy that we neither write about them nor answer their criticism about us." Such a 'gentlemanly' approach leaves little room for dialogue.

The future of the Armenian-language media in the Middle East depends as much on socio-economic variables that are beyond the control of the community as it does on the determination and dedication of a handful of publishers, editors and writers. ■

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