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Harabedian Runs To Represent Armenians in the California State Assembly

By Aram Arkun

Mirror-Spectator Staff

PASADENA, Calif. — There are a new generation of Armenian-Americans vying for office in California — and just in time, as this year there are no Armenians serving in the state legislature despite the large local population. John Christopher Harabedian is a promising member of this group, running for State Assembly District 41, which includes the cities of Pasadena, La Cañada Flintridge, La Verne and Sierra Madre. A Democrat, he appears to be a front-runner at least in fundraising, with \$827,000 in hand on December 31, of which \$621,589 is cash.

Entering Politics in Sierra Madre

He is a native of Sierra Madre, and it seems has always been thinking politically, even as a child. He ran for student council in 5th grade, and he recalls how his parents taught him a lesson in leadership. They asked why he wouldn't want to be in a position where he could make decisions and changes, and if he wouldn't do it, who would?



On the campaign trail with the three Harabedian boys

This advice led him in 8th grade to become class president of St. Rita Catholic School and to run for student government in Loyola High School and Yale University as an undergraduate (where he studied political science).

Harabedian said: "If you believe that you, your community, your identity, whoever you think you see HARABEDIAN, page 10



The tense border region in Syunik (OC Media photo)

Armenia Continues Opposition To 'Corridor' for Azerbaijan

By Shoghik Galstian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia signaled on January 12 its continuing rejection of Azerbaijan's demands for an extraterritorial corridor to the Nakhichevan exclave that would pass through a strategic Armenian region bordering Iran.

Baku renewed those demands this month after Armenian leaders expressed hope that the two South Caucasus states will sign a peace treaty soon. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev insisted

on January 10 that people and cargo transported to and from Nakhichevan through Armenia's Syunik province must be exempted from Armenian border checks.

Aliyev's top foreign policy aide, Hikmet Hajiyev, claimed last week that this would not compromise Armenian sovereignty over Syunik. Hajiyev argued that the European Union has a similar arrangement for Russia's Kaliningrad exclave sandwiched between EU members Poland and Lithuania. He said Baku

is seeking the same solution for Nakhichevan.

In written comments to RFE/RL's Armenian Service sent on Friday, the Armenian Foreign Ministry declined to clarify whether Yerevan has discussed it with Baku. It said that the Armenian government's "Crossroads of Peace" project unveiled by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan last November should serve as a blueprint for opening the Armenian-Azerbaijani border to travel and commerce.

see CORRIDOR, page 5

Azerbaijan Court Upholds Jail Term for Karabakh Armenian

BAKU (Azatutyun) — An appeals court in Azerbaijan confirmed on Monday, January 15, a 15-year prison sentence given to an ethnic Armenian from Nagorno-Karabakh who was arrested by Azerbaijani security services last summer during his aborted medical evacuation to Armenia.

The 68-year-old Vagif Khachatryan was among Karabakh patients escorted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to Armenian hospitals for urgent treatment. He was detained at an Azerbaijani checkpoint in the Lachin corridor and then charged with killing and deporting Karabakh's ethnic Azerbaijani residents at the beginning of the first Armenian-Azerbaijani war.

see COURT, page 5

Pashinyan Accuses Aliyev of 'Serious Blow To Peace Process'

By Arshaluys Barseghyan and Ismi Aghayev

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has accused Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev of trying to generate new territorial claims against the country, calling it a "serious blow to the peace process."

During a meeting of the ruling Civil Contract party in the town of Gavar in the eastern Gegharkunik Province on Saturday, Pashinyan stated that Armenia and Azerbaijan had already agreed to delimit their borders based on the Alma-Ata Protocol.

Most former Soviet Republics, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, agreed in the 1991 protocol to recognize each other's then-Soviet borders.

Pashinyan was responding to statements see ACCUSATION, page 2

Armenian Film Makes Oscar Shortlist for First Time

By Sarah Mills

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — A heart-warming story of a man jailed for wearing a tie has become the first Armenian film to make it onto the Oscar's shortlist, in the international feature category.

"Most of the films that have been made about Armenia really tend to revolve around the genocide. I wanted to make a film that would be enjoyable for Armenians and something that could relate to non-Armenians," said US actor Michael A. Goojian, who has directed and written the film. He also stars in it.

Shot in Armenia with a mostly local cast and crew, "Amerikatsi"



(American in Armenia) is also an attempt to rebuild the country's film industry, which lost its way after independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

"What the film is about is survival and resilience. Despite the setting, it's very hopeful and playful," said Goojian, whose late father was Armenian.

It tells the story of Charlie, an American who repatriates to then Soviet Armenia after World War Two and finds himself in prison because of his tie.

From his cell, Charlie realizes he can see inside an apartment nearby and lives vicariously through the life of the couple there.

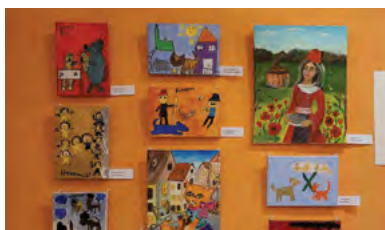
Making the film was itself a test of resourcefulness.

Filming, interrupted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, took about seven months to complete, wrapping in July 2020 as border see OSCARS, page 20

GERMANY

Creative Challenges For Aspiring Young Artists

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NEW YORK

Armenian Christmas Celebrated at St. Vartan Cathedral

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LATVIA

Karine Paronjanc: An Absolutely Armenian Artist In Latvia

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ARMENIA

NEWS from ARMENIA

Khachaturyan Attends Davos Forum

DAVOS (Public Radio of Armenia) — On a working visit to the Swiss Confederation, President Vahagn Khachaturyan participated in the opening ceremony of the Davos World Economic Forum on January 16.

He will also participate in the panel discussions organized within the forum. Bilateral meetings with the leaders of a number of countries are also planned.

He had a working lunch with representatives of the Armenian community in Zurich.

Armenia Commemorates Baku Pogroms' Anniversary

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — The Armenian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on the anniversary of the pogroms against Armenians in Baku, on January 16.

“34 years ago during these days pogroms against Armenians in Baku became culmination of policy of forcible displacement & ethnic cleansing of Armenian population from Azerbaijani SSR. Hundreds were murdered, mutilated & disappeared, half a million became refugees,” the Foreign Ministry said in a statement on X on January 15.

“We pay tribute to memory of innocent victims & stress imperative to prevent such policies & need of all the rights to be addressed.”

President Invites Belgian King to Armenia

DAVOS (Armenpress) — Within the framework of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the President of the Republic of Armenia Vahagn Khachaturyan met with Belgium's King Philippe of Belgium.

The two discussed the situation in the South Caucasus region, the friendly relations between Armenia and Belgium, and the deepening of the Armenia-EU partnership.

“In his speech, the King of Belgium shared his warm impressions from his private visit to Armenia [in 2018] and highly appreciated the role of the Belgian Armenian community in the country's life,” read the statement.

Khachaturyan invited King Philippe to visit Armenia again at the end of their talk.

US Anti-Corruption Official Visits Yerevan

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan this week received Richard Nephew, Coordinator on Global Anti-Corruption of the US State Department.

Pashinyan emphasized close cooperation and its continuity with the US administration in the fight against corruption and the development of democratic institutions. Nikol Pashinyan noted that the anti-corruption policy and promotion of the reform agenda is a priority for the Armenian government and the executive is consistently moving towards the development of anti-corruption mechanisms and increasing the efficiency of institutions.

PM Pashinyan Accuses Aliyev of ‘Serious Blow to Peace Process’

ACCUSATION, from page 1
made by Aliyev on January 10, in which the Azerbaijani president asserted that Yerevan's insistence on using a 1975 Soviet map, apparently the last to be created prior to the USSR's dissolution, was something “we can never agree to.”

He went on to claim that in prior decades, large swathes of land, including Armenia's southern Syunik Province and the Armenian capital Yerevan, had been handed over to Armenia from Azerbaijan which he called a “grave historical crime.”

He said this was why Azerbaijan “strongly objected to” the use of the 1975 map, stating that either earlier maps should be used or “we should not base our work on any map at all.”

Aliyev also said that signing a peace agreement should not be tied to the delimitation process, citing his country's long demarcation processes with Russia and Georgia, the latter of which he said “only 70 percent” had been “identified and confirmed.”

“If we mix these two topics, then the peace agreement will be delayed, maybe to 30, 50 years from now. We believe that a peace agreement should be signed, the sooner, the better,” he said.

Aliyev also demanded the “unconditional” return of four Azerbaijani border villages which have been under Armenian control for decades.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s, several areas of both Armenia and Azerbai-

jan along their border fell under the control of the opposing side.

In response to Aliyev's demand, Pashinyan appeared to agree, stating that there should be no occupied territories on either side, but that this “cannot be implemented without a mutually agreed upon map.”

“How can we determine whether this area is in the territory of Armenia or Azerbaijan? There is a way to do this, to rely on the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991 and the de jure maps expressing its provisions and go, look at the reality on the ground, and match the reality to the maps,” he said.

Pashinyan concluded by saying he feared Azerbaijan was attempting to create grounds for future wars.

He said, “Sometimes, when getting acquainted with Azerbaijan's proposals, we get the impression that an attempt is being made to create a document that would legitimize future wars. This is beyond logic.”

Corridor to Nakhichevan

Pashinyan also criticized Aliyev's comments about the “Zangezur corridor,” a proposed corridor that would connect western Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhichevan through Armenia's southern Syunik Province.

He said that Armenia was not opposed to establishing roads connecting western Azerbaijan and its exclave, but noted that Armenia would provide Azerbaijan with the road “on the same condition that Iran provides that connection” — referring to a highway and railway Azerbaijan is building through Iranian territory to Nakhichevan.

The establishment of a road connecting

western Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan has been a point of contention in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in November 2020.

Azerbaijan cites the ceasefire agreement as saying that the road should fall under Russian control, while Armenia maintains that the road should be overseen by the Armenian authorities.

The agreement stipulates that Armenia “shall guarantee the safety of transport communication between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic,” and that “control over transport communication shall be exercised by the Border Guard Service bodies of the FSS of Russia.”

“It is not written anywhere that Russia should provide communication security in any territory of Armenia. On the contrary, it is written that Armenia guarantees security in its territory, and it is natural who else should ensure it,” said Pashinyan.

Pashinyan also responded to comments Aliyev had made about Armenia's weapons imports.

“He questions the territorial integrity of Armenia, and on the other hand, he says that the Armenian army buys weapons from France and India. What is the logic here? Is it Azerbaijan's perception that Armenia should not have an army? If this is the case, it means that Armenia's right to exist is being questioned, which is absolutely unacceptable.”

(This article originally appeared on the website www.oc-media.org on January 15.)

Government Funds New Plant Moved Away From Azerbaijani Border

By Nane Sahakian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia's government approved on January 11 a concessional loan worth 3.5 billion drams (\$8.6 million) to a US-Armenian joint venture that relocated, for security reasons, a metallurgical plant which it began building on the border with Azerbaijan last year.

The construction site in Yeraskh, a border village 55 kilometers south of Yerevan, came under fire from nearby Azerbaijani army positions on a virtually daily basis in June.

The automatic gunfire, which left two Indian workers seriously wounded, began one week after the Azerbaijani government protested against the \$70 million project. It claimed that building the industrial facility without its permission is a violation of international environmental norms. The Armenian Foreign Ministry brushed aside Baku's “false” environmental concerns, saying that they are a smokescreen for impeding economic growth and foreign investment in Armenia.

Despite making defiant statements, Armenian and US investors behind the project suspended work on the plant and started moving construction and industrial equipment from the site later in the summer.

In a statement issued after its weekly meeting in Yerevan, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's cabinet confirmed that the facility is now being constructed just outside the town of Ararat, several kilometers from



The site of an industrial plant built in Yersakh, June 15, 2023.

Yeraskh.

It said that the investors wasted 2 billion drams on the construction work in Yeraskh and now need additional funding. The low-interest government loan, repayable in four years, will be channeled into the project through a state investment fund, added the statement.

The plant is to process scrap metal, employ up to 500 people and have an annual turnover of at least \$200 million. Its owners plan to finish the construction by the end of this year.

Areg Kochinyan, a political analyst, believes that the plant's relocation sets a dangerous precedent for Armenia, meaning that Azerbaijan is in a position to disrupt

economic activity in Armenian border regions by force.

“This situation could and should have been avoided. It's a classic example of irresponsible administration which we have seen many times,” Kochinyan said, commenting on the initial site of the plant located just a few hundred meters from an Azerbaijani army post.

Armenia's largest gold mine also located on the border with Azerbaijan was similarly targeted by systematic Azerbaijani gunfire last spring. The Russian owner of the Sotk gold mine announced in June that it has no choice but to end open-pit mining operations there and put many of its 700 workers on unpaid leave.



ARMENIA

EU and Armenia Celebrate Six Years of Collaboration under CEPA Agreement

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — On January 16, representatives from the European Union (EU) delegation and the EU headquarters and representatives from the government of Armenia convened to celebrate six years of partnership between the EU and Armenia under the Comprehensive Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed 2017. The purpose of the meeting was also to underline the importance of CEPA in EU-Armenia relations, evaluate the status of CEPA implementation and enhance its efficiency.

The CEPA Retreat brought together 70 participants, fostering peer-to-peer brainstorming sessions. It provided a unique



The panel comprising EU and Armenian officials

EU Again Warns Azerbaijan Against Attacking Armenia

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — The European Union on January 16 again warned Azerbaijan against invading Armenia following Baku's renewed demands for Yerevan to open an extraterritorial corridor to the Nakhichevan exclave.

"The EU has been using every opportunity to pass clear messages to Azerbaijan that any violation of Armenia's territorial integrity would be unacceptable and will have severe consequences for our relations," the EU foreign policy spokesman, Peter Stano, told the Armenpress news agency.

"We remain firm and steadfast in this stance," Stano said, commenting on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's latest statements on the conflict with Armenia.

Aliyev said last week that Azerbaijani people and cargo transported to and from Nakhichevan through Armenia's Syunik province must be exempt from Armenian border checks. He also demanded Armenian withdrawal from "eight Azerbaijani villages" and again dismissed Yerevan's insistence on using the most recent Soviet maps to delimit the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan rejected Aliyev's demands, saying that they amount to territorial claims to Armenia. Pashinyan also accused Baku of undermining prospects for the signing of an Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty strongly supported by the EU and the United States.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, issued the same warning to Baku in November as the 27-nation bloc decided to deploy more observers to Armenia's volatile border with Azerbaijan. The EU launched the monitoring mission in February 2023 with the stated aim of preventing or reducing ceasefire violations there.

EU officials have so far not elaborated on the "severe consequences" for Azerbaijan. They resisted calls to impose sanctions on Baku even after last September's Azerbaijani military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh that forced practically the entire population of the region to flee to Armenia.

Some analysts linked their stance to a 2022 agreement to significantly increase the EU's import of Azerbaijani natural gas. The head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, described Azerbaijan as a "key partner in our efforts to move away from Russian fossil fuels" when she signed the deal in Baku.

platform for assessing progress and devising robust strategies to advance the implementation of CEPA. Armenian Government representatives shared insights into their experiences with CEPA, discussing successes, challenges, needs, and ways to better work together.

During the Retreat, the Government of Armenia identified and shared areas where successful CEPA-related reforms have taken place, showcasing the tangible impact of the agreement. Furthermore, areas where reforms were particularly challenging were identified, focusing on ways to enhance monitoring and communication, emphasizing the collaborative nature of EU-Armenia cooperation.

Ambassador Vassilis Maragos, head of the EU Delegation to Armenia, commended Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan for Armenia's enduring cooperation and mutual commitment to fostering tangible, sustainable outcomes for Armenian citizens. Highlighting CEPA as the

cornerstone of this engagement, Maragos emphasized the shared values and interests between the EU and Armenia. He reiterated EU's support for democratic and economic reforms that would expedite Armenia's modernization process.

Grigoryan acknowledged the continuous implementation of CEPA despite challenging times since its signing. He expressed gratitude for the EU's accelerated support of rule of law reforms and economic initiatives. Grigoryan reaffirmed Armenia's commitment to deepening cooperation with the EU and advancing along the path of implemen-

tation of key reforms. He underscored the EU's instrumental role in introducing



Ambassador Vassilis Maragos

invaluable know-how and experience of Member States at this stage of Armenia's development.

Armenia Reports First Delivery of 'Delayed' Russian Weapons

By Ruzanna Stepanian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — After repeated delays, Russia has delivered to Armenia the first batch of weapons envisaged by bilateral defense contracts signed after the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, according to senior Armenian lawmakers on January 16.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his political allies have repeatedly complained about those delays amid Armenia's worsening relations with Russia. Deputy Defense Minister Hrachya Sargsyan said in early December that Yerevan paid Russia's state-owned arms manufacturers \$400 million but has still not received any military equipment so far. He too declined to specify the types of weaponry that are listed in those contracts.

Andranik Kocharyan, the chairman of the Armenian parliament committee on defense and security, said late last week that some of those weapons have been delivered to Armenia.

"[The Russians] are giving us something, not on a scale anticipated by us in line with the volume of the signed contracts," Kocharyan told Armenian Public Television. "But I'm sure that things will be sorted out in the process."

Gagik Melkonyan, another pro-government member of the parliament committee, confirmed on January 16 the first delivery of the Russian weapons, saying that it was carried out "recently."

Speaking to RFE/RL's Armenian Service, Melkonyan claimed to be unaware of what exactly was supplied to the Armenian army. The Armenian Defense Ministry also did not shed light on that.

Russia's ambassador to Armenia, Sergei Kopyrkin, acknowledged late last month "issues" in the implementation of Russian-Armenian arms deals. He implied that Russian defense companies have not fulfilled their contractual obligations on time because of having to manufacture more weapons for the Russian military embroiled in the ongoing war with Ukraine.

"But these are working issues that are resolved in the dialogue between relevant agencies of Russia and Armenia," Kopyrkin told the TASS news agency. The two sides are now also "discussing new agreements in the field of military-technical cooperation," he said without elaborating.

Russia has long been Armenia's main supplier of weapons and ammunition. But with no end in sight to the war in Ukraine and tensions between Moscow and Yerevan continuing to grow, the Armenian government is increasingly looking for other arms suppliers.

Since September 2022 it has reportedly signed a number of defense contracts with India worth at least \$400 million. In October 2023, it also signed two arms deals with France. Pashinyan and members of his political team say that this is part of their broader efforts to "diversify" Armenia's defense and security policy. They regularly accuse Moscow of not honoring its security commitments to Armenia.

INTERNATIONAL

Israeli Foreign Minister Turns on Erdogan

JERUSALEM (*Jerusalem Post*) — Foreign Minister Israel Katz slammed Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan on January 12 in an X (Twitter) post, as Turkey backed South Africa's accusations of genocide at the International Court of Justice.

Katz posted, "The President of Turkey @RTErdogan, from a country with the Armenian Genocide in its past, now boasts of targeting Israel with unfounded claims. We remember the Armenians, the Kurds. Your history speaks for itself. Israel stands in defense, not destruction, against your barbarian allies."

Rachida Dati Makes Return To French Politics

PARIS (news.am) — The Armenians of France are sad, French journalist Jean-Christophe Buisson, who is the deputy director of *Le Figaro* daily of France, wrote on X (Twitter) on January 12, commenting on the appointment of Rachida Dati as the new Minister of Culture of France, because of her anti-Armenian position.

And under his post, Buisson posted a photo from 2016 of then-French President Francois Hollande and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. "In 2016, Rachida Dati had signed this petition, basically saying to *Le Figaro* that the good Azeris were victims of the bad Armenians. We know the rest: [Armenian] ethnic cleansing of Artsakh [(Nagorno-Karabakh)] by the Azeris. The Armenians of France are sad this evening," Buisson wrote.

European Parliament Won't Observe Azerbaijan Presidential Elections

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — The European Parliament will not observe the upcoming presidential elections in Azerbaijan, a number of leading MEPs said in a statement on Tuesday, January 16.

Presidential elections will take place in Azerbaijan on February 7.

"The European Parliament will not observe this electoral process and consequently will neither comment on the process nor on the results that will be announced afterwards," reads the statement.

New Louvre Byzantine Department to Include Armenian Artefacts

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — The Louvre is preparing the opening of a new department of Byzantine Arts and Christianity in the East, including Armenia, Ambassador of France to Armenia Olivier Decottignies said in a post on X on January 12.

"The Louvre is the most visited museum in the world (9.6 million visitors per year). It is preparing the opening of a new department of Byzantine Arts and Christianity in the East, including Armenia.

He added, "In Armenia, the Louvre is assisting in the redesign of the Erebuni Museum."

Russia Rejects Criticism of Peacekeepers in Karabakh

By Lilit Shahverdyan

Russia's Foreign Ministry has angrily defended the performance of the country's peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In September last year the 2,000-strong peacekeeping contingent did not intervene as Baku launched a lightning offensive to retake the region, which resulted in near-complete emptying of its Armenian population.

And that came at the end of a nine-month blockade of the region during which the Russian troops were of limited help in getting supplies into Karabakh and transporting Karabakhis to Armenia for medical treatment.

A number of Armenian officials, most recently Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan, have complained publicly about what they saw as the peacekeepers' failure to protect the roughly 100,000 local Armenians.

"From September 19, ethnic cleansing started in NK. Until now, we haven't received any explanation of how the ethnic cleansing occurred in the presence of Russian peacekeepers. We haven't seen any explanations," Grigoryan said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stridently disagrees.

"We believe that these [accusations] are attempts to falsify the facts to avoid responsibility. There was no mass death of Nagorno-Karabakh civilians or significant damage to civilian facilities," she said at a briefing on January 12.

That is arguably true. Azerbaijani troops did not target Karabakhis civilians en masse, though there were sporadic reports of

atrocities in villages. The exodus of the Armenians from Karabakh was nonetheless violent and chaotic. As locals were fleeing, over 200 people died in a fuel depot explosion and an estimated 64 died during the trek to Armenia, which saw days-long traffic jams. (An estimated 220 Karabakhis soldiers lost their lives trying to resist the onslaught.)

"No one has the right to insult the peacekeepers, and we will respond to those who insulted them," Zakharova added.

She also bristled at the use of the term "ethnic cleansing," which has been used by many other Armenian officials, including Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

"Regarding the claims of ethnic cleansing in Karabakh, I would like to be presented with any facts, any documents, or statements from any international organization that is considered authoritative in Yerevan, for example, the United Nations or another organization," she added.

The peacekeepers were stationed in Karabakh under a Russia-brokered ceasefire in November 2020 immediately after Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War and seizure of lands in and around the region. The Russian troops operated amidst ambiguity, with no clearly defined mandate.

Questions about the efficacy of the peacekeeping effort arose early on. In December 2020, Russian peacekeepers were unable to prevent Azerbaijan from seizing two Karabakh villages in their purported zone of responsibility. Over the next three years, Azerbaijan continued incursions into Karabakh, capturing additional territories and putting civilians at risk along the border.

In December 2022, as Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor, the sole route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the outside world, the peacekeepers were unable or unwilling to unblock it. The blockade continued for over nine months until Azerbaijan's decisive offensive in September that resulted in the dissolution of the de facto republic through another Russia-brokered ceasefire and the surrender of local defense forces. In the ensuing days, the entire population of Karabakh evacuated to Armenia, leaving the region empty save for a few dozen inhabitants, all while Russian peacekeepers looked on.

Russia said several of its troops were killed during Azerbaijan's offensive, including a senior officer, but did not reveal details of the incident nor the precise number killed.

After Azerbaijan established full control over the region, the Russians dismantled several observation posts. They now coordinate their peacekeeping activities exclusively with Azerbaijan. The peacekeepers' news bulletin keeps recording the absence of ceasefire violations and continuous interactions with Baku "to ensure the security of the civilian population."

Most recently, Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister signaled the possible withdrawal of peacekeepers in 2025, as the 2020 tripartite agreement initially stipulated.

Armenian officials have not commented on Zakharova's remarks.

(Lilit Shahverdyan is a journalist based in Stepanakert. This article originally appeared on the website www.eurasianet.org on January 15.)

UK House of Lords Committee Holds Hearing On Karabakh, Armenia-Azerbaijan relations

LONDON (Public Radio of Armenia) — The International Relation and Defence Committee of House of Lords held a hearing on Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations on January 10. During the hearing, Thomas de Waal and Marina Nagai were invited to give their independent opinions questions raised by the House of Lords committee peers.

The Armenian National Committee of UK participated in the hearing with the presence of its Chairperson Annette

Moskofian. Previously, ANC-UK sent briefings to be distributed to the committee members on War crimes, Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide, Destruction of Cultural and Religious heritage and POWs and illegal abductees. ANC-UK also asked Luis Moreno Ocampo, Lemkin Institute, the Tatoyan Foundation, the Echmiadzin, HART and Global Witness to submit reports to the committee ahead of the session.



The hearing at the House of Lords



INTERNATIONAL

Azerbaijani President Doubles Down on Demand for Ex-Soviet Exclaves' Return

Azerbaijan's president doubled down on his country's right to sovereignty over a handful of territories that belonged to Soviet Azerbaijan but have been under Armenian control for more than 30 years.

In his first interview in 2024 to local TV stations, President Ilham Aliyev touched on the February 7 snap presidential election, his government's performance in 2023, the military seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh, and prospects for a peace deal with Armenia.

One question posed to him was about the fate of ex-Soviet-Azerbaijani exclaves and villages now under Armenian control in light of the border delimitation work between the countries.

The villages at issue here are distant from and far smaller than the main territory that has been under contention for three decades - Nagorno-Karabakh. Now that Azerbaijan has restored full sovereignty over Karabakh, more focus is on the villages, and their status is also in play as the two sides prepare to negotiate over a formal border and a final resolution to the conflict.

There are seven such villages in northwestern Gazakh district. Four of the seven villages - Baghanis Ayrim, Lower Askipara, Kheyrimli, and Gizilhajili - were

on the Azerbaijani side of the border between the two former Soviet republics, and were occupied by Armenian forces in the 1990s. Upper Askipara, along with two more villages - Sofulu and Barkhudarli - are oddities of Soviet border-drawing: village-sized exclaves of one former Soviet Socialist Republic inside the borders of another (more than 4,100 Azerbaijanis fled those villages).

Another Azerbaijani exclave, Karki, is further to the south, near Nakhchivan. And there is one Armenian exclave, Artsvashen, inside Azerbaijan; in the 1990s its Armenian residents faced a similar fate to those on the other side of the border.

"The villages that are not enclaves, the four villages should be returned to Azerbaijan without any preconditions," Aliyev stated. "For the villages that are enclaves, a separate expert group should be established and this issue should be discussed. We believe that all enclaves should be returned. The roads leading to these enclaves should have the necessary conditions and the people living there should be accommodated in these enclaves. So, this is our position. We cannot understand Armenia's position."

There have been rumors ever since the end of the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, that the villages would return to Azerbaijani control. Soon after the end of the war, the following day Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Azerbaijan's closest ally Turkey, referred to "the return of the Gazakh villages" in a speech to parliament. In June last year, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's comment at a Q&A session gave the impression that his government was willing to give up Karki.

Most recently, in October, Azerbaijani media speculated that Pashinyan had pledged to return the villages to Azerbaijan, citing the statement he signed with the leaders of the EU, Germany, and France, in which he recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

Also in October, Aliyev told European Council President Charles Michel by phone on October 7 that eight villages of Azerbaijan were "still under Armenian occupation, and stressed the importance of liberating these villages from occupation."

While the issue is still debated, Armenian and Azerbaijani border delimitation commissions keep meeting on the border, without mediators' support. Aliyev said in

his interview that the next meeting of the commissions will be held this month, and the issue of the Gazakh villages is on the agenda.

Another issue at the heart of the border talks is the presence of Azerbaijani troops deep inside what's generally regarded as Armenian territory. Azerbaijan made several incursions into Armenia since the 2020 war and currently holds an estimated 215 square kilometers of its land.

Aliyev said in the interview that his army would not be retracting any time soon. "Neither from the positions of May 2021 nor from the positions of September 2022. We are not taking a step back because that border must be defined. However, our location, which is currently disputed by Armenia, does not include any settlement. The positions and heights where we stand have never been inhabited before. Today, Armenia continues to occupy our villages, and this is unacceptable. I want to note again that this issue will be clarified during the meeting of the commissions at the end of this month."

(This article was originally published in www.eurasianet.org on January 12.)

Controversy After Stalin Icon Found in Tbilisi's Sameba Cathedral

By **Tata Shoshiashvili**

TBILISI — An icon dedicated to Saint Matrona of Moscow in Tbilisi's Sameba Holy Trinity Cathedral depicting the saint in the company of a man resembling Joseph Stalin has stirred controversy in Georgia.

Footage of the icon in Sameba was first shared on January 6 by Ilia Chigladze, a Georgian archpriest, on Facebook. Soon after, Giorgi Kandelaki, a member of the opposition European Georgia party and a researcher at the Soviet Past Research Laboratory, shot and shared footage of the icon on his social media handles.

The icon depicts Saint Matrona of Mos-

cow, a 20th-century Russian Orthodox Church saint. A man who both Chigladze and Kandelaki claimed to be Joseph Stalin, the Georgian-born dictator and leader of the Soviet Union, appears in one of the smaller icons surrounding the central depiction of Matrona.

In an interview with Tabula on Saturday, Andria Jagmaidze, the head of the Patriarchate's public relations department, did not deny that Stalin was depicted in the icon but stated that the icon was dedicated to Matrona, and not the Soviet leader.

"If somewhere on the fresco of St. George, [the Roman Emperor] Diocletian is depicted, this does not make it an icon of Diocletian," he said, adding that the controversy surrounding the Matrona icon was meant to overshadow the celebration of Orthodox Christmas on January 7.

The following day, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, the leader of the conservative Alliance of Patriots party, announced that he had donated the icon to the cathedral. He said that Stalin had met Matrona for counsel during World War II.

While Tarkhan-Mouravi cited Matrona's official biographer in his statement, the Georgia-based St. Paul's Orthodox Chris-

tian Theology Centre stated that no other historical sources confirm that Stalin and Matrona had met.

Archimandrite Ioane Mchedlishvili of the Holy Trinity Cathedral stated on Sunday that the icon had been in the cathedral "for several months."

On the same day, Gocha Barnov, a theologian, told TV channel Mtavari Arkhi that the icon's presence in the cathedral was 'blasphemous' and that it should be removed immediately.

In a 2021 publication commissioned by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy titled 13 Myths about Stalin, the Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy found that Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime has actively been trying to portray Stalin as a "religious



Tbilisi's Sameba Cathedral

man" — despite the Soviet authorities' mass arrest of worshippers and demolition of churches and other religious buildings during Stalin's time in power.

(This article was originally published by OC-Media on January 10.)

Armenia Continues Opposition to 'Corridor' For Azerbaijan

CORRIDOR, from page 1

The project says that Armenia and Azerbaijan should have full control of transport infrastructure inside each other's territory. Hajiyev criticized it in a newspaper interview published on January 4.

By contrast, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian praised the project when he visited Yerevan late last month. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi reportedly told a visiting Azerbaijani official in October that the "Zangezur corridor" sought by Baku is "resolutely opposed" by his country.

Yerevan has not yet officially reacted to Aliyev's latest comments on the corridor. An Armenian pro-government lawmaker, Hovik Aghazaryan, rejected them on Friday.

"Just because we are in a difficult situation doesn't mean Aliyev should make such a statement... If he thinks that after achieving some military successes he can dictate terms, he is badly mistaken," said Aghazaryan.

Azeri Court Upholds Jail Term for Karabakh Armenian

COURT, from page 1

During his trial, Khachatryan repeatedly denied any involvement in the alleged killings of 25 Azerbaijanis from the Karabakh village of Meshali captured by Karabakh Armenian forces in December 1991. He had lived in another village close to Meshali during and after the 1991-1999 war.

A military court in Baku sentenced him to 15 years in prison on November 7. Khachatryan, who refused to be represented by an Azerbaijani government-appointed lawyer during the trial, appealed against the verdict. The appeal was predictably rejected by the higher Azerbaijani

court.

The Armenian Foreign Ministry condemned the "sham trial" late last year. It demanded the immediate release of Khachatryan and other "Armenian POWs and civilians still held hostage in Baku."

They include eight former political and military leaders of Karabakh who were arrested at the Azerbaijani checkpoint during the mass exodus of the region's ethnic Armenian population resulting from Azerbaijan's September 19-20 military offensive. They are facing various grave accusations rejected by the Armenian government as well as current Karabakh officials.



Vagif Khachatryan went on trial in Baku, October 13, 2023.



INTERNATIONAL

Creative Challenges for Aspiring Young Artists

By Muriel Mirak-Weissbach
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

What better way to honor a great artist than to foster development of art in youngsters? That is the idea behind the International Art Festival and Competition hosted by the Armenian Cultural Society in Hessen (Armenische Kulturverein in Hessen AKV) at the end of 2023. On December 9, the AKV celebrated the 95th birthday of renowned Armenian artist Minas Avestiyan (1928-1975), and at the same time the 55th anniversary of the founding of the AKV itself (1968-2023). They marked the double jubilee with an exhibition and a contest.

The competition, "Painting beyond Borders," was open to children and youngsters in two age groups, 6-12 and 12-18 years old. The motto was: "Painting is like magic: with paint and brush you lend wings to your imagination." And the contest translated this motto into practice. Each participant had to paint a picture illustrating an episode or a character in an Armenian or German fairy tale, from a selection of eight, by Hovhanness Tumanyan and the Brothers Grimm. The contestants received texts of the fables in both languages. The selections included "A Drop of Honey" and "The Dog and the Cat," by Tumanyan, and "The Wolf and Seven Little Kids" and "Cat and Mouse in Partnership," by the Grimms. In addition to an illustration, each young artist had to submit a brief text, explaining what made that particular fable special, why the child chose the subject, and what the child learned from the story.

The paintings were due by November 11, and the jury selected the best 36 submissions. These were exhibited in the meeting hall (without the artists' names) and it was up to the guests to select the three best from each age group. These six finalists then had to produce a new work of art — on the spot — and on a new theme. They were allotted 90 minutes to work, and were provided everything they needed — paints, easels, pencils, paper, etc. In the end, three young artists were selected from each age group, for the first, second, and third prize.

Shushan Tumanyan, co-chair of the AKV, opened the festival by presenting the Society's work, the jury members, and the leading sponsor, the House of Resources



Fables illustrated, including The Dog and the Cat, Cat and Mouse in Partnership

(HoR). The HoR, a model project financed since 2016 by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), is dedicated to fostering social participation and integration through cultural, educational, and civil society activities with various clubs and associations. Tumanyan also welcomed the sponsor of the prizes for first place, the Central Council of Armenians (Zentralrat der Armenier in Deutschland, ZAD), as well as board members of the AKV's sister organizations, the Armenian Community of Aschaffenburg and of Wiesbaden.

About 80 paintings in total were on display, all by participants between 6 and 18

years of age. As prescribed in the competition, the finalists then had to take up brush and paints to create their ultimate entries. After separate deliberations, jury president Ishkhan Nazaryan announced the names of the winners, and the artists were awarded their prizes. In the younger group, 6-12 years old, Gayane Avetisyan took first prize, Kayane Haroutunian, second, and Sofia Shabazyan, third. The winners of the older group, age 13-18, Sewan Zincircioglu won the first prize, followed by Lusine Gasparyan, second, and Katharine Hovhannisyan, third. Encouragement prizes were given to Malia Barynovska, Elena Anagnostaki, Aren Hovhannisyan,

Malia-Sophie Krostewitz, Soffia Telva, and Tatevik Ohanyan. All the contestants received a certificate for having taken part, as well as "artistically fashioned" chocolates.

Before the buffet and during the jury's absence, the guests had an opportunity to visit the exhibition of works by Minas Avetisyan, and to taste the delicacies offered from the Armenian and international cuisine. Interspersed throughout the program, members of the AKV Saturday school performed music on the flute (Arpi Nazaryan), guitar (Sewan Harutyunyan), saxophone (Arevik Petrosyan), duduk (Mane Harutyunyan), and violin (Gevorg Nahapetian).



From left, Tatevik Ohanyan, Aren Hovhannisyan, Katherine Hovhannisyan, Sewan Zincircioglu, Kayane Haroutunian, Elena Anagnostaki, Lusine Gasparyan, Malia-Sophie Krostewitz, Soffia Telva, Sofia Shabasyan



Community News

LA Board of Supervisors Adopt Motion Demanding Release of Armenian Hostages

By Kevork Keushkerian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

LOS ANGELES — On Tuesday, January 9, the agenda for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisor's meeting included an item demanding the immediate release of Armenian hostages held captive by Azerbaijan. The motion was put forward by Supervisor Kathryn Barger and was co-sponsored by Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell. I and a group of concerned Armenians, including community activists Margaret Mgrublian and Alice Bedrosian, were there to address the Board in support of the motion, which then was passed unanimously. [The Board of Supervisors is the governing body of Los Angeles County.] The text of my speech follows:

Honorable Lindsey Horvath, Chair and Board Members of the County Board of Supervisors and fellow residents of Los Angeles County,

My name is Kevork Keushkerian and I am a member of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, representing District 5. I am here to support the Motion by Supervisors Kathryn Barger and Holly J. Mitchell, demanding the immediate release of Armenian hostages held captive by Azerbaijan. The Armenians in Azerbaijani captivity include the democratically-elected three former presidents of Nagorno-Karabakh, the parliamentary speaker, and several former government ministers.

The motion, with a five-signature letter to be sent to the [US] President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of the Treasury, urges the Biden Administration to impose Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act violations on Azerbaijan for the illegal detention, torture, and extrajudicial killing of Armenian POWs and hostages, and to suspend all United States military and economic assistance to Azerbaijan.

As a reminder, it is a fact that Armenians have lived peacefully in Nagorno-Karabakh for 3000 years. The Armenians call this regional homeland Artsakh. The Soviet Union created the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region within Azerbaijan in 1924, when over 94% of the region's population was Armenian.

In 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union and in 1992, Nagorno-Karabakh declared its independence from Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, this demand for sovereignty by the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh was not recognized by any nation.

In 2020, Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, Armenia's centuries old arch-enemy, launched a military assault against the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. This resulted in a 44-day conflict in which the government of Azerbaijan invaded and

see DEMAND, page 9



Students at Kapan School No. 1 in Syunik Province

Rose and Alex Pilibos High School Students Helping Hye Hopes Classes in Syunik

HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — Hye Hopes Inc. visited the Rose and Alex Pilibos Armenian School to show its appreciation to teacher Narineh Kouzouian and students who helped with synchronized instruction to students in the Syunik Province of Armenia since January 2021. The Pilibos scholars collaborated with students from Kapan, Verishen, Meghri, Sisian and Agarak in the Hye Hopes online leadership course led by Mrs. Kouzouian.

During his visit, Greg Krikorian, president and co-founder of Hye Hopes, discussed with the Pilibos students how special the moments are that they get to share with their fellow students in high school in Syunik. The students in Syunik are grateful for the moments they spend on Zoom class together. Hye Hopes presented all the participating students with winter beanies as a small token of appreciation and acknowledgment. The Hye Hopes team is appreciative to Principal Maral Tavitian of the Rose and Alex Pilibos school for allowing Hye Hopes to work with her students and invites all Armenian private and public schools to join Hye Hopes in their efforts in supporting the schools in Syunik Marz.



From left, teacher Narineh Kouzouian, Principal Maral Tavitian and Greg Krikorian

Kouzouian shared that "Hye Hopes is a source of motivation fostering connections with our brothers and sisters in the Homeland, and creating a sense of unity that conquers distance. The positive energy generated in these sessions inspires students to navigate their educational journey reinforcing the belief that knowledge is a lasting power." Many of our Hye Hopes teachers, like Narineh, are working full time jobs and then logging online at 9 or 10 p.m. PST to begin their online synchronized instruction for students in Syunik.

"It truly is heartwarming seeing our youth's commitment and passion to help their fellow students in Syunik, Armenia. Narineh's commitment and tireless dedication, not only to the Pilibos students, but to all of the students in the Syunik, is admirable," stated Krikorian.

Hye Hopes Inc. was created three years ago November 23, 2020 as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization which provides essential educational resources and synchronized instruction for the displaced students from Artsakh relocating to Syunik. To date Hye Hopes Inc has provided more than 150 laptops, desktops, printers, projectors and monitors to schools in Agarak, Goris, Meghri, Sisian and Verishen, and Kapan schools Nos. 1 and 3. To learn more, volunteer and/or to donate please visit HyeHopes.org and follow us on Instagram and Facebook.



Narineh Kouzouian, Greg Krikorian of Hye Hopes, Principal Maral Tavitian, and Alex Pilibos students

Armenian Christmas Celebrated At St. Vartan Cathedral

By Stephan S. Nigohosian

NEW YORK — The Armenian Christmas Divine Liturgy on Saturday, January 6, at New York's St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral once again brought the Armenian Christian family together to mark the Feast of the Nativity and Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Consistent with the early traditions of Christianity, the mystery of the baptism of Jesus Christ is also commemorated on this day, with a special "Blessing of Water" (Churorhnek) ceremony following the Divine Liturgy.

Marking his first Christmas since his consecration as a bishop of the church, Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan celebrated the Divine Liturgy before the faithful in the cathedral sanctuary, as well as to a global audience via a livestreamed Internet broadcast.

Mesrop robustly stood and walked throughout the entire service despite having been gravely injured in a car



Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan and Godfather of the Cross Kirk Hachigian, during the Armenian Christmas service at NYC's St. Vartan Cathedral.

accident less than two years ago. It was, without a doubt, a time to give thanks for the blessings the Lord has bestowed upon the bishop and the Armenian people, carrying them through catastrophic events during the past year, particularly in Armenia and Artsakh.

As candlelight bathed the bright red poinsettias adorning the holy altar, wisps of incense billowed from the censers, enveloping the sanctum as it lifted the prayers of the Badarak toward the heavens. Bishop Mesrop, clad in violet and gold-colored liturgical vestments, led the congregation in prayer and blessed parishioners as he walked in procession.

Noticeably present among the lay people were Bishop Mesrop's parents, Mihran and Manya Parsamyan, who traveled from Armenia to share in the blessed joy of the Christmas service with their son.

Bishop Mesrop's homily examined the meaning of the true peace that God offers us, by juxtaposing a child's simple, playful activities with that of an adult's life clouded with trepidation and burden.

see CHRISTMAS, page 9



OBITUARY

Arpi Vartanian

Armenian Assembly Regional Director in Armenia

WASHINGTON — The Armenian Assembly of America (Assembly) this week announced the passing of Arpi Vartanian, the Assembly's Regional Director in Yerevan, Armenia.

A longtime and instrumental member of the Assembly's staff team, Vartanian served the organization in numerous capacities, both at its headquarters in Washington, D.C., including a stint as acting executive director, and in its regional office in Yerevan, for nearly three decades.

"The Assembly shares the deep pain of her family, neighbors, and many friends in this unexpected and tragic loss, as do the countless people Arpi positively impacted through her personal touches and through her training and advocacy work over the decades, and sustained commitment to serving the Armenian people and the causes of democracy and human rights," said Assembly Co-Chairs Van Krikorian and Anthony Barsamian. "Arpi truly loved Armenia and Artsakh, along with her friends and colleagues. Her professionalism and her joy in our efforts shone through with all of us. In partial tribute, an endowed fund for interns in Armenia, a program she pioneered, is being established and the Director's office in our Yerevan office will be named in her honor. It will be difficult to imagine those without her."

Vartanian began employment in Yerevan in 1994 as Director of the Assembly's NGO Training and Resource Center, followed by roles as the director of Grassroots and Internship Program in 1996, country director for Armenia and Artsakh in 1997, Acting Executive Director in 2000, and assumed the role of the newly-formed Ar-

menia Regional Director position in 2015 that included responsibilities for Assembly undertakings in Armenia and Artsakh. She worked closely with the Assembly's flagship office in D.C., as well as the Assembly's regional offices in Los Angeles, Boston, and New York. Vartanian also served as Director of AGBU's Yerevan Office in 2012.

A native of Michigan, where she attended the AGBU Alex and Marie Manoogian School, Vartanian graduated from Dearborn High School and Albion College, followed by the Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University. Vartanian moved to Armenia in 1993 and amassed a wealth of hands-on experience on the ground by carrying out countless projects of the Assembly on behalf of the people of Armenia.

"Arpi's deep knowledge of Armenia, Artsakh and America was invaluable. Her insights and tireless work behind the scenes led to many achievements," said Assembly Executive Director Bryan Ardouny. "She will be dearly missed by her Assembly family, colleagues, and all those whose lives she touched."

During her tenure with the organization, Vartanian served as the conduit between the homeland and the U.S., helped raise public awareness of Armenian issues with U.S. and other officials, spearheaded educational initiatives, coordinated and participated in meetings with members of government and community leaders, collaborated with national and international organizations, and connected with youth from the Diaspora and Armenia, including leading the Assembly's Yerevan Summer Internship



Program, which was established in 1999.

Vartanian also routinely traveled and led Congressional Member Delegations to Artsakh. In the aftermath of the 2020 Artsakh War, she was joined by Assembly Congressional Relations Director Mariam Khaloyan on a trip to assess the plight of people and the ensuing humanitarian crisis.

With her close knowledge of the country and its institutions, Vartanian coordinated numerous Armenian Assembly missions to Armenia, organizing their itineraries and securing meetings with key officials. Vartanian greeted hundreds of Armenian Assembly members who were introduced to the country through her and her generous spirit.

She also skillfully steered many delegations, large and small, ranging from U.S. journalists and analysts to government officials and special guests to meet their objectives and improve Armenia's standing with the international community.

Memorably, Vartanian welcomed the Morgenthau family to Armenia in 1999 and saw to every detail of their visit from meeting President Robert Kocharyan to

joining the Armenian people on April 24 in laying flowers at the genocide memorial in remembrance of their grandfather Ambassador Morgenthau. A larger gathering of the Morgenthau family traveled to Armenia for the centennial commemorations in 2015, and Vartanian again made all necessary arrangements for their introduction to Armenia and its grateful people.

With her devoted work through the Assembly that positively impacted Armenia, Vartanian was awarded the Medal of Gratitude in 2017 from President Serzh Sargsyan expressly for her "contributions to the strengthening of Fatherland-Diaspora relations."

Reflecting on receiving the distinction, Vartanian stated that she was "honored" to receive the presidential award and she remains "dedicated to Armenia and the work we do to better relations with the United States for the good of our people in Armenia and Artsakh."

Vartanian also received a Certificate of Congressional Recognition from Congresswoman Judy Chu (D-CA) for her role in bolstering relations between the U.S., Armenia, and Artsakh, as well as a Certificate of Recognition from the City of Los Angeles by Mayor Eric Garcetti.

"We were heartbroken to hear of Arpi's passing," said Assembly President Carolyn Mugar. "We worked together for many years, and she had the heart of the Assembly embedded within her as she was with us for so much of our history. Arpi witnessed positive changes in Armenia and built many long-standing relationships in the homeland and in the U.S. We mourn for her family and friends."

Burial services took place on Friday, January 12, at Arin Berd Cemetery in Armenia. Memorial services will take place in the U.S. and Armenia, with details to follow.

Nerses Babayan

Armenian Writer and Businessman

LOS ANGELES — Nerses Babayan was the son of Yervant and Rosine Babayan and the grandson of Archpriest Nerses Avak Kahana Babayan of Aintab.

Babayan passed away in New York on November 8, 2023, after a short period of illness. According to his wish, the interment took place at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles. The ceremony was officiated by Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, Primate of the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, surrounded by Armenian clergy.

He was born in Aleppo in 1944 but moved to Beirut with his family after his father, Yervant Babayan, was invited to become the principal of the Tekeyan Cultural Association's Vahan Tekeyan School. After his graduation from the Tekeyan School, he continued his studies at the AGBU Melkonian Institute in Cyprus. It is here that, as a teenager, he took his first steps at writing political articles for *Arev Daily*, published in Cairo. On his return to Beirut, he attended Haigazian College, and along with his studies, he started writing articles in *Zartonk* daily. Soon, he was invited to become the political section editor of the *Ayk* daily newspaper in Beirut.

To continue his higher education, Nerses moved to the United States and attended Boston College. He was invited to serve as assistant editor of the Armenian-language *Baikar* paper and the *Armenian Mirror Spectator* weekly. After his graduation from Boston College, he moved to Washington D.C. to complete his studies at John Hopkins University. Soon after graduation he settled in New York, to start a family and establish his own private consulting firm, catering to several Permanent Mis-



sions within the United Nations.

In spite of his preoccupation with his rapidly growing business, it is remarkable that he created time to continue writing articles about critical issues and challenges facing the Armenian communities in the Middle East, as well as in the United States of America. His articles, which appeared in *Zartonk*, *Baikar*, *Nor Or* and the *Mirror-Spectator*, were very much appreciated both for addressing critical and challenging issues in the Middle East and the United States of America, as well as for his unique style of writing.

Nerses will always be remembered for continuing and expanding the larger Babayan family tradition of community service and philanthropy towards the Armenian Church, Armenian schools, Armenian organizations, and the Armenian press.

see BABAYAN, page 9

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Armenian Christmas Celebrated at St. Vartan Cathedral

CHRISTMAS, from page 7

“A child has the security and trust that his parents are watching over him to ensure his safety, allowing him to completely immerse himself in the joy of the moment without concern for the past or anxiety about the future,” he said. “We, too, have the assurance of placing our trust in a loving, trustworthy parent — our Heavenly Father — who watches over us at all times.”

He reiterated that faith asks believers to place their trust in God. “We then can fully engage in the peace that God offers us,” he said, “one that surpasses all understand-

ing and guides our hearts and our minds in Christ to guide our steps and embolden our spirits.”

The Godfather of the Cross (gunkahayr) for the Christmas Blessing of Water ceremony was Kirk Hachigian, a member of St. Kevork Church in Houston, TX, whose involvement, guidance, and support of countless initiatives have benefitted the Diocese and the larger Armenian community.

The Christmas Day Divine Liturgy was also made possible with the participation of Fr. Davit Karamyan, Vicar of St. Vartan Cathedral, as well as a large contingent



Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan (at center) celebrated the Christmas liturgy and led the Blessing of Water Ceremony, shown here. Standing at right is Kirk Hachigian, this year's Godfather of the Cross, who hails from the Diocese's St. Kevork parish in Houston, TX.



Holy Communion on Armenian Christmas at St. Vartan Cathedral, NYC. Pictured are Cathedral Vicar Fr. Davit Karamyan, Deacon Adam Bullock, and Deacon Manouel Rakoubian.

LA Board of Supervisors Adopt Motion Demanding Release of Armenian Hostages

DEMAND, from page 9

eventually occupied a big portion of Artsakh, including Nagorno-Karabakh's second largest city Sush. As a consequence of this war, 4,000 young Armenian soldiers gave their lives and many others were wounded.

In 2023, Azerbaijan launched another full-scale military assault on Nagorno-Karabakh, determined to reclaim the entire enclave and force the Armenian population out of their ancestral homes. Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian leaders had no choice but to accept a ceasefire, put their weapons down, and abdicate their powers. In the aftermath, more than 100,000 Armenians of Artsakh fled to neighboring Armenia and

asked for asylum.

It is unheard of that former democratically elected government officials of a formerly sovereign region be captured by invaders, put in prison and charged with treason, while the entire world turns a deaf ear.

On behalf of the Armenian population in the Greater Los Angeles area, I would like to thank the Supervisors for their bold action in demanding the release of the Nagorno-Karabakh leaders. Your understanding of the situation, compassion for the falsely imprisoned government leaders, and care for the Armenian population in the County of Los Angeles is deeply appreciated. Thank you one more time and God bless you all.



A group photo of supporters of the motion, with Supervisors Kathryn Barger and Holly J. Mitchell in the middle

Nerses Babayan, Armenian Writer and Businessman

BABAYAN, from page 8

Nerses inherited his love, respect and support for the Armenian Church from his grandfather, Archpriest Der Nerses Babayan, a Genocide survivor and one of the organizers and leading figures of the heroic self-defense of the Aintab Armenians. It was his grandfather Der Nerses, who led the Aintab Armenian deportees through the desert until they arrived safely in Aleppo. Yet, that was not all. When Catholicos Papken of Cilicia was informed that a few families had willingly stayed behind in Aintab, he commissioned the courageous Der Nerses to go back to Aintab and convince the families to leave Aintab and settle in Aleppo. Der Nerses accepted this challenging and dangerous mission. He selflessly left behind his young wife and his two-months-old firstborn son, Yervant, went back to Aintab to convince the families, and brought them to Aleppo. Thanks

to Der Nerses Babayan's courage and commitment a very dangerous mission was accomplished successfully.

Nerses's love and steady support for Armenian schools and education was inspired by his father, Yervant Babayan, the legendary educator and dedicated principal of the TCA Vahan Tekeyan School in Lebanon for more than fifty years.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the school, the Tekeyan School Board of Trustees extended a moving invitation to their beloved former principal, Yervant Babayan, and his wife Rosine, to be present at the festivities. The latter, who at that time were residing in Los Angeles, were delighted with the prospect of attending this celebration of an institution that had been an integral part of their everyday life for many decades.

Sensing the eagerness of his parents, Nerses decided to accompany them to

Lebanon, considering their advanced age and the long distance and duration of the trip. He planned a comfortable and safe trip from Los Angeles to Beirut, surprising his parents, as well as the organizers, who appreciated Nerses's thoughtfulness and commitment. This was an unforgettable once-in-a-lifetime experience for his parents, the organizers, as well as for Nerses himself.

Continuing the greater Babayan family tradition of appreciating and supporting Armenian education, Nerses Babayan will be remembered as a staunch supporter and generous benefactor of the Tekeyan School, where healthy generations of Armenian youth continue to be inspired and empowered to become exemplary citizens and proud Armenians.

In an uplifting message of condolence, support, and appreciation, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians Kare-

kin II praised Nerses as a worthy descendant of the larger Babayan family for his unwavering faith and continuous support of the Armenian Church, particularly the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church, as well as Armenian schools, particularly the Vahan Tekeyan School of Lebanon and the Guiligian School of Aleppo.

According to his wish, Nerses now rests in peace at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles, in close proximity to his beloved parents Yervant and Rosine Babayan.

On Monday, December 18, 2023 a special *Karasouk*, or requiem service, presided by Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church, took place at St. Vartan Cathedral in New York City. May he rest in peace.

The Tekeyan Cultural Association of the United States and Canada and the *Mirror-Spectator* staff extend their profound condolences to the Babayan family concerning the loss of Nerses Babayan, who had supported both organizations staunchly for many years.

Harabedian Runs to Represent Armenians In the California State Assembly

HARABEDIAN, from page 1
are representing, needs representation, don't expect anyone else to step up, because most people don't want to do this." He summed up his philosophy in one simple principle: "If you are not at the table, you are on the menu."

He earned a master's degree in comparative social policy from Oxford University in 2006, and a law degree from Stanford University in 2010. Only two years later, in 2012, he won election to the Sierre Madre City Council, and was reelected in 2016. While on the council, he served twice as mayor of his native town, which is basically a rotating position chosen from the five council members. He said, "I loved not only serving my neighbors and my constituents, and the whole town where I grew up, but also being able to solve problems, and think creatively about basic issues of public safety, infrastructure, clean energy."

When he was elected, he said that there was a million-dollar deficit, so the council proceeded to adopt zero-based budgeting, meaning starting over at each budget cycle

There was an informal two-term limit, so towards the end of his second term Harabedian announced his candidacy for Los Angeles County Supervisor (District 5) in September 2019, but he lost against incumbent Kathryn Barger in the March 2020 election. While he had served Sierre Madre in a part-time unpaid public office, he also had been busy professionally, working at a variety of law firms (and one year as a deputy district attorney), while in his married life, by 2020 he was expecting a third son.

So 2020, especially with the constrictions of the Covid pandemic, Harabedian said, was an opportune occasion to focus more on his family and paid work for a while. He began working for Omni Bridge-way, a large firm dealing with legal finance and risk management, and continued there for over three years.

Running for State Office

Harabedian could not resist reentering the political arena, however. He said this decision was motivated by a sense of duty and service, and exclaimed, "I love this district. I was born and raised here, and I

of winning in such a dynamic would be very tough, even though that Senate district included the heart of the California Armenian population. Consequently, in the beginning of August 2023, Harabedian announced he would drop the Senate campaign to run for State Assembly District 41. He said later that there was not a "huge difference" in the opportunity to work in the legislature and accomplish "good things," whether you are one of 40 in the Senate or one of 80 in the Assembly.

When asked to characterize his political views, he started out by confirming that he was obviously a Democrat, and elaborated: "I am fiercely rational, and I view myself as a classic reformer, as someone who wants to change the institution. I do view that a lot of politicians, and candidates especially, feel like we are just rats in a maze. I feel like there has been a maze and there have been contraptions and a system set up and we run through it, and we all try to get to the end to get the cheese. I don't think there are enough people trying to change the maze. I don't think there are enough people trying to change the institutions."

In other words, he views himself as a reform-minded pragmatist. When asked whether that approach was similar to that of President Bill Clinton, he agreed. He said, "I think most of us are in the middle. I view politics as 80 to 90 percent of people who live in this country and in this state want the same things. They want basic quality of life, they want basic safety, and they want to make sure that if they play by the rules, they can continue to succeed and take care of their families." He said that though one hears a lot about the extremes, on both left and right, he finds the two-party system in the US important because it forces moderation.

The Campaign

After entering the Assembly race, Harabedian set up his own law firm in September 2023 to do legal work periodically because he realized he could not simultaneously work for a company and campaign. In fact, he said, "This venture, and this seat, really requires if you can do it, full-time campaigning. It is a district that has 500,000 people in it. To get the amount of resources that you need to run a campaign, to effectively communicate with that many people — a few hundred thousand voters — you need to raise a lot of money, and have resources and an apparatus behind you."

He said that he has been campaigning pretty much full-time, seven days a week, since July, with weekends in some ways busier than weekdays since that is when a lot more direct voter contact is carried out. By mid-December, he had two fulltime staff members, a campaign manager and finance director, and a field director, who oversees everything being done with volunteers, such as door knocking and voter communication. He also has hired a team to advise on high-level political strategy.

He explained his success in raising money for the campaign as in part due to a network of personal contacts, including people he grew up with in Sierre Madre, went to school with, former constituents and business contacts, and friends from all aspects of life. He said this is called "love money" in this field, and his support also has come from close personal friends in the Armenian community (though he added that percentage-wise money from Armenians has not been that great overall).

He said that the serious approach to the campaign and his qualifications also may help convince potential supporters that he is able to win the race and accomplish things. Despite this, Harabedian said, "Financing for a campaign takes a lot of hard work. You crawl through glass to raise every dollar, but the harder you work the more successful you become."

His support, he said, has come across the spectrum, including from labor and business (both large and small). He said that realistically, most successful candidates running for State Assembly, Senate or even Congress have to raise money from a variety of sources, and to spend a lot of time on this which they could have used to interact with voters.

When asked about potential conflicts of interest due to campaign donations, he said, "I do think there is too much money in our politics. I think that it has a corrupting effect on the system, mostly because of the perception. A lot of people don't believe in our democracy anymore because they see a lot of candidates who run and get elected. They look and see how much money is flowing into these campaigns, and it is usually not mostly from mom and pop [sources]. It is usually from special interests and I do think a lot of people question whether people who get elected to these positions can remain neutral, and can actually make decisions based on the merits and not based on the money."

Harabedian declared that real reform was necessary to raise voting rates and bring people back into democracy.

Goals in Office

Harabedian listed several important issues he would focus on during a first term in the State Assembly, starting with homelessness, which he characterized as an absolute emergency. With at least 60,000 people homeless in Los Angeles County, three people die on the streets daily, so these people need help in an urgent way.

Secondly, Harabedian said he would focus on economic sustainability and the quality of life in general in California, where the cost of basic services such as health-care, or rent and goods have increased so much that many people are priced out of living there. He said that this would require a variety of policies in connection with jobs and economic employment.

Third are issues connected with energy, the climate and natural resources. Harabedian said, "The biggest thing that government needs to figure out how to do, and this is not only for California but our country and the world, is a collective action problem: how can we use the sun and natural energy resources to power our lives, and how do we do it quickly, since we are running out of hydrocarbons and we see the impact of climate change. There is a real threat to the existence of my kids' generation, and to their kids especially."

Electoral reform, particularly campaign finance reform, is necessary to achieve solutions to the abovementioned problems, Harabedian said, since otherwise the system will remain inefficient in electing people with innovative vision on these issues. The Supreme Court has ruled that money equals speech, in the Citizens United case, and corporations are like human beings when it comes to freedom of speech. Harabedian said that therefore reform is first needed on the judicial level to overturn such rulings. At the California state level,

continued on next page



John Harabedian at his desk (photo courtesy John Harabedian)

and examining every line item. Pension obligations were fully funded so that interest payments were reduced. The volunteer fire department was turned into one with full-time staff.

Perhaps the lasting legacy that Harabedian is most proud of is establishing a social microgrid by building a solar panel field to electrify and run the city's water department. Harabedian said, "All those things are hallmarks of good government that every city, every county, and the state should be doing, but in a small city like Sierre Madre, with only 11,000 people, we showed that you can do these big things too. You can do them if you just have some ingenuity and some stamina to push forward on them."

The council was fairly diverse politically, with usually two Democrats, two Republicans and an independent during Harabedian's 8 years there, yet they were able to agree on concrete projects. Harabedian said, "At the local government level...partisanship doesn't necessarily ever need to come into play when you talk about paving roads, funding pension obligations, and hiring police officers and firefighters. Clean energy, somehow, becomes a partisan issue, because of climate change and climate action plans, but for us, not only were we doing the right thing for the environment but fiscally, and for our budget, it saved us money."

am very protective of it." He also said he was protective of what he calls the American dream, which in his great-grandparents' case involved emigrating here from Armenia, and in a few generations having descendants able to reach political offices like that of mayor.

He explained: "I think that that story and that ability to prosper here in California is being threatened, mostly by economic instability, and I think it is a challenge for most people, for working families, to actually live here. If you look at a lot of things going on, I think a lot of people are really dissatisfied with the quality of life here." He recalled the fifth-grade conversation with his parents and said if not him, then who, concluding, "It remains a calling and really a fire in the belly to do it, even though it is not exactly the most convenient personal thing to do."

Initially, Harabedian announced in February 2023 that he was running for the California 25 Senate District seat which included Glendale, Pasadena, and much of the south San Gabriel Valley, though he and his wife also were aware of the Assembly seat. He was the first candidate for this position, but a second candidate jumped in a few weeks later, followed by what Harabedian called a "multimillionaire self-funding candidate with a very strong demographic advantage."

Harabedian said that he realized the odds



COMMUNITY NEWS

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he said that publicly financing elections and more disclosure of where money is coming from in campaigns would help allow the election of more representative politicians.

Family Background

Harabedian's paternal great-grandparents, Tatos and Astrig, came to the US from Russian Armenia not too far from Yerevan in 1907. They came almost directly to the Los Angeles area, and John Harabedian's great-grandfather became one of the first Armenian trash haulers (a field that Armenians dominated for a period in southern California), with a cart that he pulled by hand. They settled in Boyle Heights, and soon had a son, Harabedian's grandfather, also named John, with four sisters. John joined the US Navy, and on his return, met and married a native American Cherokee. The family moved soon after having children to Arcadia, California, for the good public schools. Harabedian's father, again named John, followed his own father into the trash business.

Consequently, Harabedian said, "I was the first non garbage waste hauler John Harabedian in my family." Nevertheless, he still feels a connection to the industry. He said, "In a weird way, I don't know how to explain it, when I see a trash truck, when I even see a trash bin, it's like it is in our DNA."

Although Harabedian's grandmother and mother were not Armenian, he said, "We had a strong patriarch, my grandfather, who was Armenian, and we always viewed ourselves as a very strong Armenian family... Even my cousins, who don't have the Armenian last name, still very much view themselves as Armenian." Although his grandfather discouraged the family from speaking Armenian because they were in America, his grandfather and his sisters, and then in the next generation, Harabe-



John Harabedian with his wife Young-Gi and eldest son at Garni, Armenia (photo courtesy John Harabedian)

dian's father and his father's sisters, did know the language a little. Harabedian's Cherokee grandmother learned Armenian because she lived with her husband's parents for years and they only spoke Armenian, and she learned how to cook Armenian dishes too.

In his family, Harabedian related, "From our personal experience, I just think that there is just a strong family pride and bond in the Armenian culture and it obviously comes from a crucible of tragedy. There is this recognition that it came very close to where we no longer existed and we have to be very cognizant of that. I do think that the Armenians are a strong people, a smart people that care a lot about the things that are important in life, whether it is science, art, our culture, or government, but I think it was really typically familial for us. At no point do you even question it. I do think



At the Harabedian campaign headquarters on E. Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena

that there is this bond. As many of my Armenian friends say, even a drop of Armenian blood is always enough for people."

Harabedian was baptized at St. Gregory Armenian Apostolic Church in Pasadena, but he grew up in Sierre Madre, where there were only a few hundred Armenians. As he put it, there were still various parts of his life that connected with Armenians. They went to Glendale or Pasadena on high holidays and big events only. However, Harabedian went to Catholic school his whole life and did not learn the Armenian language.

Things changed later on after he formed his own family, marrying Young-Gi, a transportation planner born in Korea. Harabedian and his wife sent his three children to Armenian day care, and their nanny is Armenian and speaks Armenian to them. He said, "My kids know more Armenian than I do. My wife has been incredibly supportive in insuring that her sons — our sons — are Armenian. That is something that was lost on me. I think on the language thing, you have to be very direct and intentional about preserving that."

Moreover, in 2017, Harabedian, together with his wife and firstborn son, went to Vanadzor, Armenia, as part of the sister city delegation for Pasadena. He said, "I think it was the most incredible trip that we have ever taken," and hopes to go again soon.

Harabedian's children also have learned the Korean language. He remarked that "Koreans and Armenians have a lot in common. From a history of a people in terms of colonization and persecution, there are a lot of similarities. There are a lot of strong family values, family centric views of the world. My wife and I have had so much in common from our respective upbringings, that I think that our sons being both Korean and Armenian is a pretty cool combination. It is an amazing thing to grow up in such an ethnically diverse family."

On the other hand, as most of Harabedian's Cherokee family connections live in Oklahoma, he does not have much direct connection with Cherokees, who are largely organized in a tribal fashion. Harabedian did note that if elected to the State Assembly, not only would he become the only Armenian there, but also only the second native American representative.

Armenian-American Politics

Harabedian's parents were not involved in Armenian politics. In some ways, he said, he only became fully aware of the latter after he ran for city council. That led him to meeting the Armenian National Committee (ANC) and Armenian Assembly people, and this was, he said "eye-opening."

"Getting involved in politics, you realize right away just how under-represented our [Armenian] community was," Harabedian reflected. He met Ardashes "Ardy" Kasakhian (an Armenian-American politician now on the Glendale City Council) and became involved with ANC. Harabedian said, "Then I realized that we need to focus on, how do we get our community more representation in a state where, in many ways, we have gone backwards from the [former Governor] George Deukmejian days. How do we get this bench of leaders elected and in positions of policy and power? I think that process really opened my eyes to just how important my identity really was and how impactful it could be for others."

In his current campaign, in addition to ANCA and the Assembly, he said he has a lot of friends in different organizations, such as the Armenian Rights Council of America and the Armenian General Benevolent Union, and is also involved in the Armenian Caucus in Sacramento. He said, "That is really, really important, because that is our voice in Sacramento, even though we don't have an Armenian there. It is really making sure that people know our issues, and know that this is a priority, so I have spent a lot of time doing that too."

The Armenian component to his State Assembly campaign is "quintessential," he said, because Armenians lack representation. "I feel like we as Armenians have felt like we are on the menu, especially the past year, when we saw what I think have been very clear actions of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Artsakh by Azerbaijan... As great as some of our federal elected officials have been to the Armenian community, I think it is very different when you have Armenian elected representatives at these levels," Harabedian said.

Having elected representatives on the state level in a powerful state like California will increase Armenians' ability to communicate with the federal administration and Congressional representatives on issues of importance to their community, he said. Harabedian observed that having very powerful people like Paul Krekorian on Los Angeles City Council is great but

there is only so much that one person can do. He pointed out that "Armenians have been a very good funding source for politicians. We have been a very good community to show up and get people elected, but we haven't done a great job of making sure that our community is in these positions at a greater number — these positions being state and federal level. We do have a lot of Armenians in local office, whether it is city councils or school districts."

If Harabedian gets elected to the Assembly, he said he would be "working with federal officials, whoever my congressional representatives will be, tirelessly talking to the Administration, and working with the Administration to get some real relief in Artsakh, to get some real economic help for Armenia, to actually put Armenia and Armenian people internationally on the same level of priority as many of our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community, in Israel, and throughout the Near East and Middle East." He promised to work hard on getting more Armenians into Congress as well as into local elected office, and push for Armenian-American diplomats and ambassadors in the State Department.

As far as California local issues that are important to Armenians, Harabedian said, "I think Armenians, like any population, are struggling with cost of living, paying our rent, and seniors being able to afford their prescriptions... I do think discrimination generally is something that the Armenian community continues to deal with, whether it is in Glendale or Pasadena — having non-Armenian communities put us in a box and view us in a certain way. I think people are tired of that rightfully so." Basically, though, he noted the same aforementioned quality of life issues that are important for most Californian communities.

Harabedian called for Armenians to work together more and expressed concern about internal divisions over issues in Armenia causing harmful and unproductive battles. He left the readers of the *Mirror-Spectator* with the following thoughts on the future: "We need to think as a community about how to have an impactful legacy on a number of fronts. I know there is government, there is business, and there is arts and culture. But how do we as Armenians leave this place — earth — and this country, better off with our stamp in the process? I think we have a long way to go in elevating who we are, in making sure that non-Armenians know just how important we are as a people on every different level."



Arts & Culture

Simon Maghakyan To Present Talk On Destruction of Artsakh's Cultural Monuments by Azerbaijan

FRESNO — Investigative researcher Simon Maghakyan will speak in a virtual presentation on “Heritage in Peril: Artsakh’s Cultural Monuments in the Aftermath of Invasion” at 7:00PM on Monday, January 29, 2024. The Zoom registration link is: <https://bit.ly/armenianstudiessimonmaghakyan>.

The event is the first in the Armenian Studies Program Spring 2024 Lecture Series and is supported by the Leon S. Peters Foundation Fund.

The last Armenian prayer in Artsakh was held at Dadivank on October 1, 2023, following Azerbaijan’s



Simon Maghakyan

invasion and ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh. What happens to the monuments that Armenians had to leave behind? What can stakeholders

do to prevent the scenario of Nakhichevan, where in 1997-2006 Azerbaijan eradicated the entire known inventory of Armenian Christian heritage? The talk will discuss current monitoring efforts and explore pathways for raising the cost of destruction to Azerbaijan and creating sustainable incentives for preserving Artsakh’s cultural monuments.

Maghakyan is an investigative researcher and cultural heritage defender. He is a Ph.D. candidate in heritage crime at Great Britain’s Defense Academy (Cranfield University), a Community Scholar at the University of Denver, a Visiting Scholar at Tufts University and an incoming Postdoctoral Fellow at Oxford University’s Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Maghakyan’s investigative exposés on Azerbaijan’s state-sponsored erasure of Armenian cultural heritage have been cited at the International Court of Justice and praised as “rock solid” by *The Guardian*. His writing has been featured in numerous news outlets, including *Time*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*, and he has appeared, among other outlets, on Democracy Now! and the BBC. Maghakyan’s recent collaborative investigation in *New Lines Magazine* exposed the secret Azerbaijani facility that served as a basis for “concentration camp” fears in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.

The Zoom registration link is: <https://bit.ly/armenianstudiessimonmaghakyan>.

For information about upcoming Armenian Studies Program presentations, follow us on our Facebook page, @ArmenianStudiesFresnoState or at the Program website, <https://fresnostate.edu/armenianstudies>.



(PHOTO BY ANDREY LOSEVICH)

Karine Paronjanc

An Absolutely Armenian Artist in Latvia

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN/RIGA — My friend Naira Khachatryan, a specialist in Latvian, brought Latvian artist and dancer Karine Paronjanc (Paronjanca/Paronians) to my home last September. Her name was familiar to me, and I had written about her in my book, *Armenians in the World Dance*. A warm friendship immediately began with beautiful Karine, and I was completely overwhelmed with the need to introduce her to the greater Armenian world.

Karine was born in Riga; she obtained her master’s degree while studying at the Department of Monumental Painting of the Latvian Academy of Arts. In 2007 she studied fresco and graffiti techniques at the Florence Art Institute in Italy. She has had more than 20 solo exhibitions in Latvia. She regularly participates in group exhibitions in Latvia, as well as in international art projects. Since 2007 she has been a member of the Latvian Union of Artists.

Her current studio is located in one of the historical buildings of the Riga Botanical Garden. The neighborhood includes pavilions with exotic plants, scientific laboratories, buildings of an old manor house and the lecture hall of the University of Latvia.

Dear Karine, it was a great pleasure to meet you in Yerevan, though it was a tragic time for our people. What were your feelings in Yerevan?

Artsvi jan, the Armenian community of Latvia was very concerned about what is happening in Armenia. Being a public person, I have raised the issue of the blockade of Artsakh and the war in the media space very actively and repeatedly. Of course, I flew to Armenia with a heavy heart. Initially, the trip had been planned as a pilgrimage, including a visit to see the myrrh preparation in Echmiadzin. But in the end, the event was cancelled. I decided to come to Armenia in spite of the fact that many people discouraged me, many were afraid to fly into Armenia: it seemed the enemy would go further. I did not regret the decision; I was happy to see that the city lives in spite of the national calamity: the life was bubbling, including the cultural life, and there were many tourists. Well done, Armenians! Despite the difficult economic situation in the country, they have managed to accept about 100,000 refugees from Artsakh. Activists have been and continue to be active on the streets of the city and in social networks.

I always say that when I come to Yerevan, I hear the voices of Babylon. Armenians are carriers of ancient culture and it is felt in everything, even in everyday life. There are so many layers of the past there, it is such a birthday cake for antiquity lovers: legends, myths, history, East and West, Silk Road and Byzantium; such a mix of cultures, dialects. People’s genetic memory keeps the spirit of Great Armenia

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AMPAS Names Teni Melidonian Chief Oscars Officer

By Pete Hammond

LOS ANGELES (Deadline) — The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences is tightening its internal oversight and control of the Oscars and all awards-related events in an expansion of its Oscars Strategy division which started in 2022.

Longtime AMPAS executive Teni Melidonian has been promoted to the newly created position of Chief Oscars Officer. In the new job she will lead strategy, talent relations, special events and production teams for all awards programs and events. As part of the reorganization, 10-year AMPAS veteran MaryJane Partlow has been upped to Executive Vice President, Awards Production and Special Events,

Melidonian will collaborate closely with the Oscars producers and show host, Disney/ABC and Academy leadership, including the Board of Governors and its committees, and oversee the teams involved in devel-



Teni Melidonian

oping and executing the Oscars for a global viewing audience.

As the lead liaison with Disney/ABC, the Academy’s broadcast distribution partner, Melidonian heads Oscars ad sales, marketing, advertising and synergy strategies supporting audience growth opportunities globally. In 2022, under Kramer’s leadership, Melidonian led the newly created Oscars Strategy division, successfully creating a unit working year-round on all awards-related programs. The team also oversees guest and nominee ticketing and seating for awards season events and spearheads member screenings. Partlow will lead the teams in producing all awards special events throughout the Oscars season, including the Governors Awards (which will be celebrating honorary Oscar winners tonight in its 14th year), nominations announcement, nominees luncheon, Scientific and Technical Awards, and the Oscars Governors Ball.

Academy CEO Bill Kramer made the announcements this past week. Melidonian will continue to report directly to Kramer, while Partlow will report to Melidonian.

“These positions and department are vital to the Academy’s evolution
see MELIDONIAN, page 15



ARTS & CULTURE

(PHOTO BY POLINA LITVINOVA)

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. The gene of David of Sasun, the gene of the winner is very strong in the inhabitants of this long-suffering country. We love holidays, we know how to receive guests, we know how to be generous and hospitable even now, when the businessmen, who fancy themselves hegemony, mercilessly redraw the map of the world, and the very statehood of Armenia is put under great question. There is a lot of strength in our culture. Of course, like all southerners, we are too fond of celebrating life, and like all representatives of ancient peoples, we rely too much on the achievements and victories of years gone by.

In my childhood I often came to Yerevan with my parents. And every time it was like an Oriental fairy tale, thus, perhaps, my love for the table theme in painting. In my adult life, every trip to Armenia is an absolutely significant journey into my real self, a meeting with my roots. And each meeting with my ethnic homeland invariably results in a new painting cycle.

And so, it was this time too. It was a landmark trip on the eve of Sergei Paradjanov's centennial, in the context of the great director's book of screenplays, which, with a group of like-minded people and with the support of the prominent Armenian diplomat Tigran Mkrtchyan and his wife, the famous literary translator Ilza Paegle-Mkrtchyan, we hope to publish for the first time in Latvian.

I knew about you as a dancer of Eastern dances. Was it dancing or painting in the beginning? Not surprising if they bloomed simultaneously.

Of course, painting came first, I have been painting since early childhood, I always knew that I would be an artist.

I am an absolute visualist. Even with



"Spindle" (2022)

music, I see it first and hear it afterward. I draw all my work in my head first of all as a painter; I always cared about the composition of dance, the bright visual special effects. Yes, painting and dance, painting and music — they have a lot in common. After all, in painting too, rhythm and composition decide everything. But my main expressive medium has always been color, including on stage.

Dancing was a wonderful hobby in my student days! Our studio was one of the first to introduce in Latvia the fashion for exoticism, for the East. But even in this field, I continued to be more of an artist than a choreographer. And eventually it all grew into Latvia's first foreign dance theatre. Our colorful costume shows on the themes of Indian, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Caucasian dances were very popular. We even had medleys on Japanese, Chinese and Thai themes in our repertoire. I quickly realized that it could be sold, because I am Armenian, and commercialism is in our



blood. As a result, it became a financially successful project. We even went on tour to Germany, Sweden and Finland. It was a great way for young guys, students (I was a very young first-year student at that time) to combine the love for adventure and travelling with a good income.

I believe I was able to complete this really cool hobby in time, prioritize and fully dedicate myself to painting. After all, behind this extravaganza of dance was also a huge administrative work, irregular schedule, terrible physical and emotional overload. But there remained incredible memories of youth and a fantastic collection of stage photo shoots. I know what to surprise my daughters with.

Do I feel nostalgic for that life? No! Not even the urge to blow someone away with my dance moves at a friend's party. Although my body still remembers and that's great!

I will tell the truth: with the dance theatre I earned much more than I earn now being engaged in highly intellectual labor, preparing art projects and exhibitions. But I treat it philosophically and with humor. That is the way our modern world works. I always know that the

best works will be written on the table, the salon work will be bought sooner or later and I will be able to afford to create in the name of art again. Such is life. Recently, though, life has started to spoil me a bit, I have a circle of regular customers who give me the opportunity to create.

Have Latvian art critics seen something Armenian in your work?

For Latvia, I am an absolutely Armenian artist, such a typical Caucasian woman. It is both interesting and difficult at the same time, to be everywhere not completely one's own. For Armenians, I am almost a gothic Latvian, there is indeed a lot of Latvian in me. As I always joke, I am an Armenian of Baltic "spillage." But for Latvians I am an absolute exotic, a bright, not always understandable spot on the background of a delicate grey landscape. I think this multiculturalism, this interesting genetic cocktail is my main strength. You cannot see it directly, but I have the opportunity to be at

the crossroads, to see and broadcast my Armenian culture from the outside.

The genetic memory of blood keeps images of centuries-old Armenian miniature with fanciful ornaments of birds, letters and oriental motifs. Multiplied by the childhood fascination with Riga's Jugend (ed. Latvian Art Nouveau style), these images are transformed into oriental fairy tales with a Latvian accent.

Does your fascination with depicting watermelons connect to your Armenian heritage too?

Of course! I even joke sometimes when people ask what I do, I answer that I sell watermelons. The "Watermelons" collection has taken a special place in my creative biography: the watermelon-shape "lotus" has become not only my trademark, but also the most recognizable image of my art.

I also had a series of works "Love and kebabs." And there from watermelons only seeds remained - graphic, black, carelessly scattered on white discs of elegant plates, reminding of ignorant and hurried participants of the feast. The feast is over.

Paronian is the surname of a great Armenian satirist of the 19th century. Where are your roots from?

Yes, in Yerevan, just at the intersection with the street named after this satirist is my favorite house-museum of Sergei Paradjanov. I remember when I asked a taxi driver how to get to the Paradjanov Museum, he guided me: "Go straight on Paronian and you will come to Paradjanov." I still laugh on this phrase!

My roots are from ancient Armenia. My ancestors fled the genocide of 1915 from Ani, the capital of old Armenia, and ended up in the northern Caucasus. And later, my grandfather, being a kind of Armenian dandy, in search of a beautiful European life, ended up in Latvia. To move to Baltics was a very brave and freedom-loving decision. The old generation of Armenians knew and remembered my grandfather Sergey Paronjanc well. He was a very charismatic man of a wide soul; he helped many people and did a lot for Armenians. Of course, he also had an Armenian style of having fun. Old-timers humorously called him the Armenian ambassador to Latvia.

My grandmother's brother (whose family was also miraculously saved during that terrible time) became a famous professor in Moscow and headed the chair of light industry. Books and textbooks written by

Yervand Melikov are still in active use.

I have many relatives in America, and we not only survived, but also managed to get a good education and make a career. This is the trick of history: they wanted us to be wiped off the face of the earth as a nation, but in the end, we were scattered all over the world and our Diaspora is very strong.

On my mother's side, I have Siberian Latvians and Russian Old Believers — Filipovs from the colorful city of Daugavpils (the birthplace of the famous American artist Mark Rothko). Both of them were fully affected by Stalin's repressions, because, as we know, the regime always mows down the best ones.

The Armenian community in Riga is small, but it is rich in interesting people. How would you assess its creative potential?

There are many interesting people among Armenians in general. But I believe that our strength lies in our unity, which we often lack. Every Armenian thinks of himself as a prince (one can understand that - we are descendants of the Great Armenia), but sometimes one should be able to step off of his personal ambitions for the sake of the common good.

Do you pass on Armenian traditions to your children?

Yes, of course. Blood is not milk. Roots are extremely important. It is the foundation; it is the connection with one's ancestry. It is a great strength. We attend Armenian Sunday school together with our children. This sense of belonging is very important for me. My ancestry gives me my strength!

I am sure you have creative plans related to Armenia.

An exhibition in Armenia is a matter of the heart, not work, and certainly not business. Art and business in general are often mutually exclusive.

There are hints, plans and worthy acquaintances with extremely informative people, whose very communication is a great honor and spiritual value for me. Yerevan gave me a great number of incredible meetings. In many respects and thanks to you, dear Artsvi. Communicating with such people is enriching.

I hope to please you with information about my solo exhibition in Yerevan in the nearest future. The work in this direction is in progress!



ARTS & CULTURE

Recipe Corner



by Christine
Vartanian



Pomegranate Fig Braised Beef Short Ribs

Bring the restaurant home in a tender pomegranate oven braised short rib recipe from Valley Fig Growers. Mediterranean spices and figs add nuance to the recipe for braised beef short ribs.

FRESNO - Valley Fig Growers is a California fig grower-owned cooperative. Valley Fig Growers' Blue Ribbon and Orchard Choice California Figs are part of California's rich history of agriculture in the fertile San Joaquin Valley. Its grower-owned cooperative has been packing delicious, nutritious California Figs since 1959.

"Our figs are always GMO-Free, vegan friendly, and packed with nutrition. Whether you enjoy figs for their nutritional powerhouse reputation, their wonderful taste, or their reputed health qualities, we know you'll be back for more. The best dried figs come from California. Our fig-grower-owned cooperative is one of the largest handlers of figs in North America, having 30 grower members representing about 40% of the California fig industry. The soil and climate in the San Joaquin Valley are ideal for growing figs. Figs thrive in the Valley's hot, dry summer sun and rest in the cool, wet winters. Whether you're using our dried figs or fig products in a commercial kitchen or enjoying our dried figs at home, the benefits of dried figs are numerous. You can find them in your favorite store or online, under the brands: Sun-Maid, Orchard Choice and Blue Ribbon. You can count on California Figs," says Linda Cain, Vice President of Marketing & Retail Sales.

"Here's a delicious recipe from California Fig Growers for your next special event or celebration. The hallmark of an oven-braised short rib recipe is meat so tender it falls off the bone. Braised short ribs frequently appear on restaurant menus but can often be daunting to attempt at home. This recipe for braised beef short ribs brings the restaurant home. This Mediterranean-inspired take on classic, red wine-braised ribs boasts meltingly tender beef and a deeply flavorful sweet but tart sauce made with pomegranate juice and figs," adds Linda.

Tips from Valley Fig Growers for this recipe

"Roasting the short ribs in the oven enabled us to render and discard a significant amount of fat. After braising, we de-fatted the cooking liquid, then blended it with the vegetables and part of the figs to create a velvety sauce. For the figs, we prefer Orchard Choice and Sun-Maid Mission Figs with their deep, earthy sweetness that accents the rounded tanginess of the pomegranate juice. You could also use Golden Figs for a more delicate flavor," says Linda.

"Short ribs come in two styles: English-style ribs contain a single rib bone and a thick piece of meat. Flank-style ribs are cut thinner and have several smaller

bones. While either will work here, we prefer the less expensive and more readily available English-style ribs. If using flank-style ribs, flip the ribs halfway through roasting in step 1."

The main spice in this recipe for braised beef short ribs is ras el hanout. Literally defined as "head of shop," this complex Moroccan spice blend traditionally features a host of warm spices; the flavor and spiciness of store-bought versions can vary greatly by brand, or you can make your own.*

Serve this dish spooned over polenta with a garnish of cilantro and sprinkle on sesame seeds.

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 pounds bone-in English-style short ribs, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 4 cups unsweetened pomegranate juice
- 1 cup water
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1 carrot, peeled and chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons ras el hanout*
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 1/2 cups (9 oz.) Orchard Choice or Sun-Maid California Mission Figs, stemmed and halved
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds
- 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro

PREPARATION:

Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 450°F. Pat short ribs dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Arrange ribs bone side down in a single layer in a large roasting pan and roast until meat begins to brown, about 45 minutes.

Discard any accumulated fat and juices in pan and continue to roast until meat is well browned, 15 to 20 minutes. Transfer ribs to bowl and tent loosely with aluminum foil; set aside. Stir pomegranate juice and water into pan, scraping up any browned bits; set aside.

Reduce oven temperature to 300°F. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, carrot, and 1/4 teaspoon salt and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in ras el hanout and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

Stir in pomegranate mixture from roasting pan and 1/2 cup figs and bring to simmer. Nestle short ribs bone side up into pot and bring to simmer. Cover, transfer pot to oven, and cook until ribs are tender and fork slips easily in and out of meat, about 2 1/2 hours.

Transfer short ribs to bowl, discard any loose bones, and tent loosely with aluminum foil. Strain braising liquid through fine-mesh strainer into fat separator; transfer solids to blender. Let braising liquid settle for 5 minutes, then pour defatted liquid into blender with solids and process until smooth, about 1 minute.

Transfer sauce to now-empty pot and stir in vinegar and remaining 1 cup figs. Return short ribs and any accumulated juices to pot, bring to gentle simmer over medium heat, and cook, spooning sauce over ribs occasionally, until heated through, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer short ribs to serving platter, spoon 1 cup sauce over top, and sprinkle with sesame seeds and cilantro. Serve, passing remaining sauce separately.

* The mixture usually consists of over a dozen spices in different proportions. Common ingredients include cardamom, cumin, clove, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, allspice, dry ginger, chili peppers, coriander seed, peppercorn, sweet and hot paprika, fenugreek, and dry turmeric. It's essential to the savory pie known as b'stila, but makes an excellent addition to lamb burgers and roasted chicken as well.

Recipe and photo by Cook's Country.

Valley Fig Growers
2028 S. Third Street
Fresno, California 93702

Eating well starts with a single choice of what to eat. By eating just 4 figs a day, you can partake in fig benefits. If you make this recipe, snap a photo and tag @valleyfig - Valley Fig Growers would love to see what you're cooking on Instagram and Facebook.

For this recipe, go to:

<https://valleyfig.com/dried-fig-recipes/pomegranate-fig-braised-beef-short-rib-recipe/>

For Easter Bread Fig Wreath recipe, see: <https://valleyfig.com/dried-fig-recipes/fig-easter-bread-wreath-recipe/>

For a Braised Brisket Recipe with Apricots and Figs, go to: <https://valleyfig.com/dried-fig-recipes/braised-brisket-recipe-apricots-figs>

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B'stila savory pie with ras el hanout



ARTS & CULTURE

Atamian Hovsepian Gallery Presents Meghan Arlen's 'Obscured Geographies'

NEW YORK — Atamian Hovsepian Curatorial Practice, in conjunction with the Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center, announces Meghan Arlen's exhibit, "Obscured Geographies," her first show at a major New York gallery.

The work currently on exhibit was born out of the artist's curiosity about land use and the monumental changes observed in the span of just one or two generations. Arlen was struck by the new and often surreal aerial geographies created by landscape alterations brought about by modern industrial agricultural farming, natural gas extraction, and large-scale residential developments. These changes of course are now visible to all simply by using Google Earth, or from the seat of a passenger airplane flying overhead.

Arlen's uneasiness about the large-scale processes that have produced these unnatural landscapes were at odds with the awe she felt about the eerily beautiful curves, colors, and compositions they created.

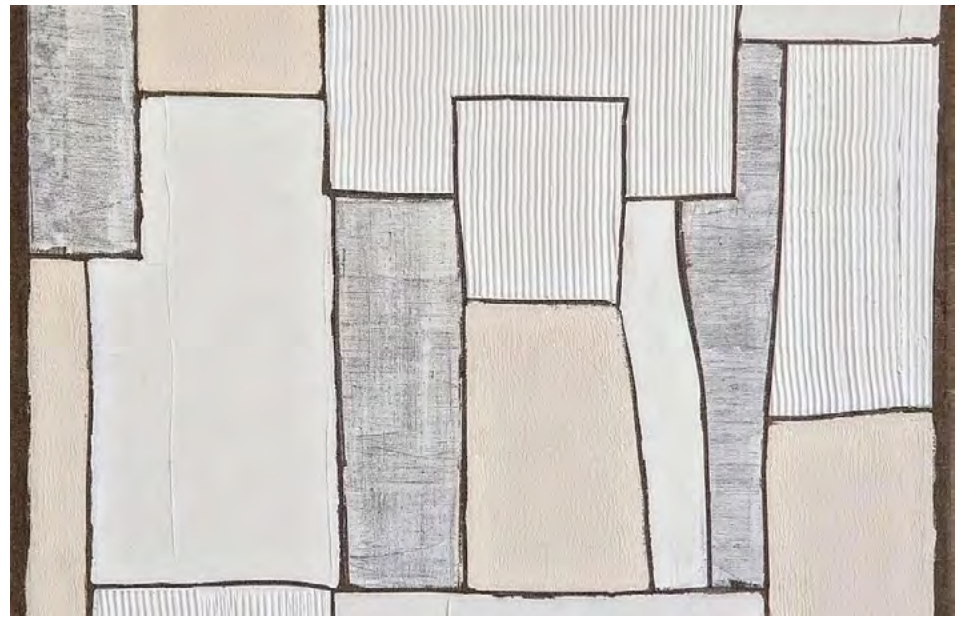
This collection of work — textural ex-

plorations of obscured aerial landforms — plays with movement and tactility. "Obscured Geographies" is also an ode to the medium of Venetian plaster and Arlen's desire to use this material in new and creative ways.

To observe the interplay of plaster with other materials, she incorporates charcoal, liquid iron, copper paint, gauze, fabric and other found textured and corrugated media. The results are beautifully intricate and wholly original.

Based in Brooklyn, Meghan Arlen studied fine arts as an undergraduate but has in recent years focused her energy on learning skilled trades. These include Venetian wall plaster application techniques, high-end interior design, specialty installation and fabrication, and building sculptural wood furniture.

Beginning in 2015, Arlen apprenticed for several years under Justino Guerrero, a Los Angeles master Venetian plasterer. She concurrently worked for LA-based designer Andrea Michaelson, a savant in



One of the creations by Meghan Arlen

innovative material design, including metal, wood, glass, plaster, plastic, stingray skin, leather, and fabric.

In 2021 Arlen moved to New York, where she undertook training in carpentry, learning to build sculptural, solid wood furniture from milling to finishing. She approaches her art practice as an artisan, submitting to the sometimes physically strenuous efforts that her material demands. Her recent work conveys her love for the historically two-dimensional medium of painting and a desire to explore its capabilities and create works where the wall plaster steps off the wall or canvas and becomes more relief than flat.

The exhibit is running through February 24. The gallery is located at 227 E 24th St, New York.

Atamian Hovsepian Curatorial Practice is a project-based curatorial initiative located in New York City.



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Itinerary	<p>Saturday 16.03 or before Sunday 17.03</p> <p>Monday 18.03</p> <p>Tuesday 19.03</p> <p>Wednesday 20.03</p> <p>Thursday 21.03</p> <p>Friday 22.03</p> <p>Saturday 23.03</p> <p>Sunday 24 to 26.03</p> <p>Wedn. 27.03</p> <p>Thursday 28.03</p> <p>Good Friday 29.03</p> <p>Saturday 30.03</p> <p>Sunday 31.03</p> <p>Monday 01.04</p> <p>Tuesday 02.04</p> <p>Wednesday 03.04</p>	<p>Rep Meet, assist at Cairo international airport & transfer to Sonesta Hotel. Gogonian club at night</p> <p>Half day visit Citadel of Mohamed Ali & Gayer Anderson museum and Khan El Khalily & El Moezz St., lunch at Ain El Sira restaurant.. HMEM at night</p> <p>After breakfast, visit of Egyptian Museum in El Tahrir & Abdin Palace - Lunch</p> <p>Breakfast and check-out, transfer to Cairo airport flight CAI/ASW, visit the High Dam, transfer to Basma hotel, Fullucka tour on the Nile. (optional Nubian village visit as optional visit)</p> <p>Abu Simbel visit, check in Nile cruise M/S Beau Soleil, Aswan market visit</p> <p>Aswan visits: Philae temple & the unfinished Obelisk, lunch on boat, Kom Ombo city & sail to Edfu City</p> <p>Edfu temple by Hantour (horse carriage), sail to Luxor city crossing Esna Locks Upon arrival you will visit Luxor East bank, Karnak temple & Luxor temple. Sound & light show in Karnak temple</p> <p>Visit west bank in Luxor, Valley of the Kings & Hatshepsut temple and two statues of Memnon, lunch and transfer from Luxor to Hurgada Prima Life Makadi resort</p> <p>Free days to enjoy the beach, the red sea & the resort. All-inclusive basis (Alcoholic beverages excluded)</p> <p>Breakfast, check-out and Hurgada flight to Cairo, bus trip to Alexandria, check-in Romance Alexandria hotel, bus tour & free time</p> <p>Alexandria tour: Qaitbay citadel, Alexandria library, Pompey's pillar, Kom el Shoqafaw catacombs, Montazah Palace - lunch at Yacht club (Not included) <i>(Optional visit: Al Alamein. Early departure, visits and joining group upon return – will miss some of Alexandria visits)</i></p> <p>Breakfast and check-out, visit of Pyramids & Sphinx area PLUS tour of Sheikh Zayed city, check-in to Baron Hotel in Heliopolis. Armenian club at night</p> <p>Full day visits: Civilization Egyptian museum & Old Cairo and lunch at Andrea restaurant. Armenian club at night</p> <p>Easter at church, Armenian cemetery and KEF night at HMEM</p> <p>Shopping spree after breakfast - CFC (Cairo Festival City Mall) in the morning, small ride into New Cairo till reaching AUC and back to Almaza City Center</p> <p>FREE day, at night bus transfer to the Nile Pharos night cruise, dinner & oriental show (2 hours Nile cruise) – Farewell party</p> <p>Breakfast & check-out, final transfer to Cairo international airport for final departure</p>
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Land cost \$US 3475 (includes 2 internal flights)

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Additional information (refer to registration Terms & Conditions)
 A valid passport with an expiry date 6 months beyond the intended stay
 A deposit of \$US 750 upon registration
 The payments should be made the latest on January 15, 2024
 All participants book their own flights and will be met at Cairo Int'l airport upon arrival

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AMPAS Names Teni Melidonian Chief Oscars Officer

MELIDONIAN, from page 12 and success as we head into our 100th Oscars and beyond," said Kramer. "Teni is creative and forward-thinking—and her years of Academy experience and strong knowledge of our awards are a huge asset for our organization during this exciting and historic time. She played a critical role in the success of last year's show. Mary-Jane is a truly innovative leader, and her prowess in producing top-notch events is exceptional. I am deeply grateful for their strategic partnership and support."

Melidonian, a well-known and well-liked member of the AMPAS Executive team was most recently EVP of Oscars Strategy. She began her Academy career in 2005 as a publicist, advancing to head communications and publicity and overseeing brand strategy and marketing before moving over to lead the Oscars Strategy team. Prior to the Academy, Melidonian worked in Washington, D.C., including for the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia.

Partlow joined the Academy in 2013 and most recently held the position of Senior Vice President, Awards Production and Special Events, contributing significantly to the Academy's marquee events. Prior to joining the Academy, Partlow produced events for Children's Hospital Los Angeles, Emirates airline and several high-profile global philanthropic families.

Piano Recital by Vardan Mamikonian Raises Awareness about the Learning Mission

PASADENA — Virtuoso pianist Vardan Mamikonian performed at a recital organized by the Learning Mission Organization on January 12, at AGBU, Pasadena.

Mamikonian was born in Armenia but has been based in Paris for many years. He has performed in prestigious concert halls around the world. The program for the evening featured captivating pieces from composers such as Chopin, Debussy, Komitas, Babajanian, Bach, and Liszt. Mamikonian's skill was evident as he masterfully tackled challenging compositions, leaving the audience mesmerized and prompting standing ovations as a display of their appreciation.

The Learning Mission is a non-profit organization that was founded by Rouben Gargaloyan and Armen Solakhyan after the 2020 Artsakh War. They teach English and computer skills to the veterans of the war.

"I am thrilled with the concert's outcome as we planted seeds in the hearts of people and, most importantly, in the hearts of our youth to show them true quality art. This is the Learning Mission," said Gargaloyan after the concert. His wife, Narine Shakhra-



From left: Armen Solakhyan, co-founder of Learning Mission; pianist Vardan Mamikonian; and Rouben Gargaloyan, co-founder of Learning Mission. (Photo by Karine Armen)

manyan, is a teacher and a board member. She expressed her gratitude to Mamikonian for donating his time. He will be in Armenia in April for several concerts and one of them will be for the Learning Mission.

For more information, visit <https://learningmissionarmenia.org/about>. To learn more about Mamikonian, visit <https://www.vmamikonian.com/>



Vardan Mamikonian performing (Photo by Karine Armen)

Literary Lights 2024: A Reading Series Featuring New Works by Armenian Authors

The International Armenian Literary Alliance (IALA), the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR), and the Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center will host Literary Lights 2024, their second annual monthly reading series featuring new works of literature by Armenian authors. Each event — held online — will feature a writer reading from their work, followed by a discussion with an interviewer and audience members.

The event, which will take place on Zoom on January 27, at 12:00 PM EST, will feature Tololyan Literary Prize recipient Aida Zilelian, author of *All the Ways We Lied*. Zilelian will be joined by Nancy Agabian, author of *Princess Freak* (2000), *Me as Her Again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter* (2008), and the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction finalist, *The Fear of Large and Small Nations* (2023).

By turns heartfelt and heart-wrenching, *All the Ways We Lied* introduces a cast of tragically flawed but lovable characters on the brink of unraveling. With humor and compassion, this spellbinding tale explores the fraught and contradictory landscape of sisterhood, introducing four unforgettable women who have nothing in common, and are bound by blood and history. Learn

more about the novel and author.

Her books are available at: Bookshop.org, Abril Books, Barnes & Noble, Amazon, Kew & Willow Books and Astoria Bookshop.

Other authors featured in Literary Lights 2024 will be Ariel Dinkjian, Astrid Kamalyan, Anait Semirdzhyan, Leila Boukarim, Sona Avedikian, Lory Bedikian and Armen Davoudian.

Selected by Barnes & Noble as their book-of-the-month for October, Ariel Djanikian's newly-released *The Prospectors* is a sweeping rags-to-riches story of survival and greed across American history following a family transformed by the Klondike Gold Rush. It is available at: Bookshop.org, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, HarperCollins and Kobo.

BÁBO by Astrid Kamalyan and Anait Semirdzhyan is the story of Tato and her family as they help Bábo (grandmother) on rug-washing day in this sweet and playful picture book tribute to Armenian cultural traditions. A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection that has earned starred reviews from Kirkus, The Horn Book, and Publishers Weekly, *Bábo* was selected as one of the New York Public Library's 2023 Best Books for Kids

Lost Words by Leila Boukarim and Sona

CALENDAR

OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

MASSACHUSETTS

JANUARY 27 — 2nd Annual Khash Breakfast, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday, sponsored by the Armenian Church at Hye Pointe Men's Club, 1280 Boston Road, Haverhill. Suggested Donation \$150. 18 and under complimentary. All are welcome to enjoy a hearty traditional Armenian breakfast with all the fixings. Limited seating available, RSVP by January 17, 2024. Contact Ed Kibarian (781) 838-1056 Myles Couyoumjian (978) 852-2959. Call/text/leave a message. In case of event re-scheduling, donations are transferable but non-refundable.

FEBRUARY 5 — St. James Armenian Church Men's Club Welcomes Harvey Leonard, Chief Meteorologist Emeritus, WCVB Channel 5. Monday. Mezza 6:15 pm, 7: pm. Losh Kebab & Kheyma, dinner. \$20.00 per person, 4655 Mount Auburn St. Watertown, MA. Church office 617 923-8860.

FEBRUARY 7 — CELEBRATING! Making authentic Armenian lavash with Arman Manoukian, owner, The House of Lavash. Virtual, on Wednesday, 5 p.m. Welcome by Cindy Fitzgibbon, WCVB TV5. For link to register, <https://www.armenianheritagepark.org/events>.

FEBRUARY 10 — St. James Reunion Dance Featuring The Yerakouyn Band and DJ Arden. Hosted by the St. James ACYOA Seniors. All ages welcome. Meze will be served. St. James Armenian Church, 465 Mount Auburn St, Watertown MA. Tickets: \$65 per person. Advance purchase only by February 1. For tickets please visit: tiny.cc/reunionsdance.

FEBRUARY 10 — Poon Paregentan ("Great Carnival") Dinner-Dance. Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Church, 180 Old Westford Rd., Chelmsford, MA. A terrific family evening of great food, music and dancing. Featuring the fabulous Ani Ensemble – Joe Kouyoumjian, Oud; Dave Anisbigian, guitar and vocals; Art Chingris, Dumbeg; and Ara Jeknavorian, clarinet. Also featuring the latest dance tunes from Armenia and American Pop music. Adults: \$35. Students: \$15. Children under 6: free. Paid reservation must be made by February 7 either on the church website, or by contacting Corie Horan, coriehoran@gmail.com, 978-967-6423.

FEBRUARY 11 — Encounters and convergence: An Aesthetic of Mind, Spirit and Vision" Lecture and Presentation by Dr. Seta B. Dadoyan. On the occasion of the publication of her *Encounters and Convergences: A Book of Ideas and Art* (2023). Sunday, 3 p.m. Free and Open to the Public. Armenian Cultural Foundation, 441 Mystic St., Arlington.

FEBRUARY 24 — 129th Anniversary of the Lowell Aharonian Gomideh of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Dinner and Program featuring Gev Iskajyan, Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of Artsakh. Presentation on "Artsakh: The Inside Story. From Victorious Republic to Loss of Independence." Jaffarian Hall, St. Gregory Armenian Church, 158 Main St., No. Andover. 6 p.m. Adults - \$35. Students - \$15. For reservations, please contact Armen at 978-265-9479, armenjeknavorian@gmail.com; or Ara, 617-803-2612, ara.a.jeknavorian@gmail.com. Portion of proceeds to benefit Artsakh refugees.

FEBRUARY 25 — Under the Snow Moon! Virtual program at 4 p.m. Welcome. Meet and Greet. Virtually walk the Labyrinth. Share wishes for the Wishing Tree. Enjoy a musical performances. For link to register, visit <https://www.armenianheritagepark.org/events>.

APRIL 6 — Concert by Vahan Artsruni (guitar) and Nelly Manukyan (flute). Premiere performance of works inspired by the poetry of Komitas, complemented by arrangements of Sharakans by Mesrop Mashtots, original songs based on the works of renowned poet Razmik Davoyan (1940-2022). Saturday, 4 p.m. Armenian Cultural Foundation, 441 Mystic St., Arlington. Co-sponsored by The Armenian Music Festival of Rhode Island, Amaras Art Alliance. Donation: \$30 through ACF office (781-646-3090) or by visiting amarasonline.com

Send Calendar Items to the Mirror-Spectator: To send calendar items to the Mirror-Spectator, email alin@mirrorspectator.com or alin.gregorian@gmail.com. You can also visit our website, www.mirrorspectator.com, and find the "calendar" section under the heading "More." You can also mail them to the Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472. All calendar entries must be received by noon on Monday before publication. There is no fee for calendar entries.

Avedikian asks what is it like to walk away from your home? To leave behind everything and everyone you've ever known? Poetic, sensitive, and based on a true family history, this picture book follows a young Armenian boy from the day he sets out to find refuge to the day he finally finds the courage to share his story.

Armen Davoudian's forthcoming debut poetry collection, *The Palace of Forty Pillars*, tells the story of a self-estranged from the world around him as a gay adolescent, an Armenian in Iran, and an immigrant in America.

Winner of the 2023 Raz-Shumaker Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry, *Jagadee: Apology to the Body* builds a eulogy in poems, claiming loss, the body's failure, often interrupted with monologues and rants. The voice is that of a daughter of immigrant parents from Lebanon and Syria, of Armenian descent, now gone.

Keep an eye on IALA's website and socials for the exact dates of each event. Visit <https://bookshop.org/lists/literary-lights-2024> to read along with the series by purchasing titles from IALA's online bookstore powered by Bookshop.



COMMENTARY

THE ARMENIAN
**MIRROR
SPECTATOR**
SINCE 1932



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THE FIRST ENGLISH LANGUAGE
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US as Main Mediator in South Caucasus Concerning Armenia in 2023

By Suren Sargsyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Throughout 2023 there has obviously been more intensified US engagement in the South Caucasus, and more active relations with Armenia. This has been the case starting from the 44-day war in 2020 unleashed by Azerbaijan. Since the end of the war, Armenian authorities have been willing to establish diplomatic relations with two immediate neighbors, Azerbaijan and Turkey, which fully aligns with the geopolitical interests of the United States.

The US strives for decreased Russian influence in the South Caucasus region and reconciliation of Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations would provide such an opportunity. Essentially, normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations has been a US foreign policy priority for the region since the 1990s. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that the US has been much more active in the region for the last 3 years, given the new realities.

As the United States is seeking the improvement of Azerbaijani-Armenian relations, it was cautious about the processes that might hinder the negotiations. The closure of the Lachin corridor by Azerbaijan was such an example. The blockade of Artsakh by Azerbaijan started back in 2022, in December and continued through September 2023 when Azerbaijan resorted to force, conducting ethnic cleansing against the indigenous Armenian population. The first US reaction to the closure of the corridor came on the second day of the Artsakh blockade. However, those were just statements without any concrete steps. A month later, Antony Blinken had a phone call with the Armenian prime minister as well as the Azerbaijani president. In his phone call with President Ilham Aliyev, Blinken “underscored the need for free and open commercial and private transit through the Lachin corridor.”

In the following months, there were a number of other statements by members of Congress, especially those involved in the Armenian Congressional Caucus, who condemned Azerbaijani actions and called upon the US administration to support the Artsakh population and stop the provision of assistance to Azerbaijan.

Obviously, the State Department and Secretary Blinken also made a number of statements on the issue during 2023. However what’s important is that in those statements the US specifically expressed its willingness to facilitate negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Taking into account the situation around Artsakh after the 2020 war and the willingness of the Armenian authorities to establish diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, the US has become significantly more active in regulating relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as between Armenia and Turkey. In a series of statements, the US administration expressed its willingness to support Azerbaijan and Armenia in the implementation of negotiations.

We can single out several tripartite and bilateral meetings and negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan organized by the United States last year. The first tripartite meeting that year between Blinken, Nikol Pashinyan and Aliyev took place on February 18 within the framework of the Munich Security Conference, during which Blinken noted that significant progress has been made in the last two months.

Another round of negotiations was held by the US side between May 1-4 at the level of foreign ministers. The negotiations between Ararat Mirzoyan and Jeyhun Bayramov were held at the George Shultz National Training Center for Foreign Affairs. The ministers had meetings with both Blinken and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. While summarizing the results of the meeting, Blinken made a remarkable statement that the parties are “really within reach of an agreement.” This caused heated discussions that a peace agreement might be signed soon, but until now, at least, there is no signed contract that is known to the public.

The last negotiations of 2023 with US mediation took place between June 27-29. These negotiations between Mirzoyan and Bayramov took place again at the George Shultz National Training Center for Foreign Affairs. Blinken’s statements after this meeting were quite interesting as well: “I think there’s also a clear understanding on everyone’s part that the closer we get, the closer you get to reaching an agreement, in some cases the harder it gets, because by definition the most difficult issues are left for the end. But I very much appreciate the spirit of candor, openness, directness that everyone has exhibited. That is the way, ultimately, to reach understanding and, finally, to reach agreement.” It seemed that the final version of

the contract would be ready soon.

Another round of the US-mediated negotiations were planned for the end of last year on November 20, but Azerbaijan refused to participate, in response to the statements made by the US Assistant Secretary of State James O’Brien in the House of Representatives. In a statement, O’Brien noted that “We’ve made clear that nothing will be normal with Azerbaijan after the events of September 19 until we see progress on the peace track,” adding that Washington has canceled “high level visits” and stopped military and other aid to Azerbaijan. Armenian Ambassador-at-large Edmon Marukyan recently announced that Azerbaijan accepted the US proposal to hold a meeting of foreign ministers in the US in January 2024, expressing hope that Mirzoyan and Bayramov will finalize the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty. The Armenian Foreign Ministry actually refuted Marukyan’s statement, stating that “if there is an agreement to meet, we make it public.” Baku, in its turn, claims that the two sides have not yet reached an agreement regarding the date and the venue of the next meeting of their foreign ministers.

The regulation of Armenian-Turkish relations remains no less important and relevant for the USA. Having these relations normalized, the United States can expand its influence in the South Caucasus region, reducing Russia’s grip. However, there is not much information available regarding US involvement in this issue in 2023. But it is known that the US keeps an eye on the issue: for example, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan raised the issue of the Armenia-Turkey negotiation process in one of his telephone conversations with Ibrahim Kalin, the chief advisor to the Turkish president. In addition, during her visit to Armenia, US Deputy Secretary of State Erika Olson met with the Special Representative for the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey Ruben Rubinyan, and according to official press information: “At the request of the guest, Ruben Rubinyan presented the details of the process of normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey.” This speaks to the fact that the United States remains interested in the prospect of the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations.

Despite the seemingly positive statements of Blinken on signing the peace treaty in the upcoming weeks or months, Azerbaijan resorted to force in September 2023 against the indigenous Artsakh population. Amid this humanitarian crisis, Samantha Power, the USAID director, visited Armenia and Azerbaijan, accompanied by US Department of State Acting Assistant Secretary for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim. During her visit Power announced \$11.5 million in humanitarian assistance. In addition, Power personally conveyed President Joe Biden’s letter, wherein the president expressed his and his administration’s support to “Armenia’s pursuit of a dignified and durable regional peace that maintains Armenia’s sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and democracy.” Similar messages were reiterated by Power during her visits to Armenia and in Azerbaijan during her meeting with Aliyev. Some time later, there was information that Azerbaijan was going to invade Armenia proper. According to some sources, it was Blinken who said that during his meeting with the lawmakers (the news was later denied by the State Department). However, considering the messages Power conveyed and Biden’s letter, one can conclude that there was indeed a risk of invasion which was prevented at least for some time.

It is hard to say that the US efforts to normalize Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations were completely effective, but it is a fact that during the whole of 2023, the USA was the main mediator, initiator and actor in the South Caucasus. This was connected to the decline of Russia’s role and significance in the entire South Caucasus region due to the outcome of the Artsakh war, as well as the concentration of Moscow’s main resources in the Ukrainian war. Back in the previous decades, the USA had laid quite solid foundations for the settlement of conflicts in the South Caucasus and was waiting for the historical moment to pursue more proactive policy. It can be unequivocally stated that the USA, starting from 1992, has not had as active an involvement in the South Caucasus as it had in 2023.

(Suren Sargsyan is an expert on US foreign policy, researcher and author. He is a graduate of Yerevan State University, American University of Armenia and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Suren Sargsyan is a founder of the Armenian Center for American Studies, a research center based in Yerevan.)

Israel Must Protect Armenian Christians From Attacks in Jerusalem

By Armen Sarkissian

Large recent coordinated attacks against members of the Armenian community of Jerusalem are a matter of grave concern. These attacks have ranged from vandalism and destruction of property to physical violence against innocent civilians.

The seriousness of the situation was underscored in a statement released by the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which said that Armenian clerics are “fighting for their lives,” while the Armenian Quarter—one of the four sections of the old city of Jerusalem—is facing the threat of “a violent demise.”

The Armenian community has been left shaken by these incidents. Israel should be no less disconcerted. Armenians have lived peacefully for millennia in the Holy Land. Indeed, Israel is home to the oldest Armenian diaspora in the world. Armenian monks made their way to Jerusalem in the years following Armenia’s conversion to Christianity in 301 AD, but there was an Armenian presence in Jerusalem as early as 55 BCE. In the 12th century, the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem made its home in the Cathedral of St James in the city’s Armenian Quarter.

The Armenian Church, with its fabulous treasure of antiquities, owns a third of Christian holy places in Jerusalem, while the city’s Armenian Quarter has a millennia-long history. The violence there stems from a dispute around a 99-year lease of approximately 25 percent of the Armenian Quarter to an Australian-Israeli businessman and his local partner who planned to build a luxury hotel on the site.

The so-called “Cows’ Garden deal” sparked outrage among the Armenian community because it would lead to the displacement of residents, demolition of homes and a seminary, and the loss of their cultural heritage.

Two months ago, in response to the disquiet within the Armenian community, the Armenian Patriarchate decided to exit the contract. Rather than engage in talks, however, the developers mobilized construction equipment and began preparatory groundwork. The Armenian Patriarchate then initiated legal proceedings to annul its agreement with them. Once again, rather than walk the legal route, the disgruntled side, according to the Armenian Patriarchate, reacted with violence.

In the past week, Jewish friends and Christian organizations from around the world have reached out to me to express their support and solidarity for Israel’s ancient Armenian community and also their profound concern about the war in Gaza. The attempts to terrorize the Armenian community is an ugly departure from the normality that has characterized relations between Armenia and Israel despite disagreements stemming from the fact that Israel, while refusing to recognize the Armenian Genocide, has sold weapons to Azerbaijan that have been used against Armenia.

By contrast, I saw a glimpse of the helpful side of Israel during my first visit to the Holy Land in the early 1990s as a callow Armenian diplomat. I was granted an audience with Yitzhak Rabin, then the prime minister of Israel. Rabin was a formidable figure, a man who inspired affection and admiration (and even loathing) in his

people. But the person who received me was an avuncular teacher. He displayed a surprisingly deep knowledge of Armenia’s past and was curious to know about events in the country. He reminded me that we were both members of ancient civilizations that had survived every attempt to wipe them out.

“We are survivors,” Rabin said. “We should never forget that.” The generosity of the great man was as surprising as it was moving. But he wasn’t done. He offered me any and all assistance. Since survival and state-building were also Armenia’s primary goals at the time, I asked if I could visit the Jewish Agency and other government and non-governmental organizations. I wanted to observe how they worked, and apply that knowledge to newly independent Armenia. Rabin immediately picked up the phone and made all the arrangements.

In 2020, before Azerbaijan launched a war against Armenia, I returned to Israel as Armenia’s president, becoming the first head of state of my country to make an official visit to the Jewish State. The occasion that took me to Israel was the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Almost fifty other heads of state had come to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum. But as a senior Israeli official reminded me, Armenians could relate to the place and all that it memorialized in a “different” way.

As other leaders departed, I was extended an invitation to stay on a while longer. I accepted, and spent the time touring holy sites, visiting Ramallah, and going to Israeli universities. The most memorable portion of my trip, however, was spent discovering Jerusalem’s Armenian Quarter, where I met monks, studied manuscripts, and got to know the local community. The city’s Armenian heritage filled me with pride.

The Armenians who arrived as refugees from the genocide in the Ottoman Empire a century ago not only enlarged Jerusalem’s ancient Armenian community but also enriched the crafts of Israel by resuming in Israel the skilled ceramics works that had been decimated by the Ottoman Empire. The finest “Kuthaya Ceramics,” named after the Armenian city in Anatolia, are now to be found in Israel. Ceramic tiles crafted by Armenian refugees adorn some of Jerusalem’s most illustrious buildings, including the American Colony Hotel and the residence of the Israeli president.

Unfortunately, what is happening in and to the Armenian Quarter is threatening more than the concord that has defined the Armenian community’s presence in Jerusalem. It is imperiling the very foundation of Jerusalem’s unique character. And it demands immediate intervention by the authorities. Israel, as a nation founded on the rule of law, must take swift action to protect the Armenian community, their historic heritage, and the uniqueness of Jerusalem.

(Dr Armen Sarkissian served as the fifth prime minister and fourth president of Armenia. His new book, *The Small States Club: How Small Smart States Can Save the World*, was published in December. This commentary originally appeared in *Haaretz* on January 15.)

To Tackle Climate Change, We Must Protect Human Rights

By Paul Polman

Coming off the hottest year on record, the dangers of climate change are increasingly understood, including by business and wider society. Less understood is the link between combatting our climate crisis and supporting basic rights and liberties.

Mary Robinson, the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, summed it up best when she said: “Climate change is the greatest threat to human rights in the 21st century.” Extreme weather, disruption and upheaval, and conflict over resources prevent people the world over from leading safe and healthy lives. Sadly, the poorest and most vulnerable are impacted most.

We need a collective response to climate change that has justice, compassion and fairness at its heart. As we enter one of the most profound periods of social and economic transformation in human history, we must protect the most fundamental freedoms of all.

Despite its shortcomings, last month’s COP28 in Dubai at least put greater focus on climate justice. Overall, the talks reached a better outcome than many had expected. But the United Arab Emirates’ ability to lead bold action was limited by its government’s ties to the oil industry, and because of its dubious record on human rights. This was a problem in Egypt the

year before, and it threatens to undermine the upcoming COP29, which to the surprise of many will be held in Azerbaijan.

Oil and gas already make up around 90 percent of Azerbaijan’s export revenues, and the government is openly working to increase gas production. At the same time, people suffer torture, arbitrary detentions and lack of an independent judiciary, while the government continues to hold more than 100 political prisoners. Independent media is stifled, with six journalists recently imprisoned. This raises the question: will the thousands of independent journalists willingly put themselves at risk to cover — and potentially criticize — COP29 in Azerbaijan?

Last year, Azerbaijani forces drove more than 100,000 Armenians from the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh after a prolonged siege. Human rights organizations have described these actions as tantamount to genocide. Rewarding such behavior by allowing the country to host COP29 sends the wrong message to the international community. As things stand, it is difficult to see how Baku will be either willing or able to unite the world around urgent climate action. How can you push others to higher ambition, while continuing to build your economy on fossil fuels? How can you convene the different players in a spirit of inclusion and compromise, while violently suppressing dissent?

Some are already saying that we should effectively bypass the summit, accepting that it will be a non-event, and instead focus on COP30, which will be held in Brazil. But we do not have the luxury of time to waste. I believe three developments could still improve the outlook for this year’s talks.

First, while the Azerbaijan decision appears done and dusted, the United Nations could end its ambivalence towards COP hosts. It could explicitly recognize concerns over Azerbaijan’s record on climate and human rights. And it could commit to a more transparent and robust selection process from here. This is not about chasing perfection or setting the bar unrealistically high. But, for their credibility and effectiveness, future COPs should be hosted by nations that are sincere about decarbonizing, and committed to the liberties on which successful transition depends. Sharper selection criteria should be applied.

Second, business can exert more pressure. When I was chief executive of Unilever, we helped develop the U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which enshrines the responsibility of companies to actively protect basic freedoms. Today, this duty takes on an existential dimension: your business can have the best carbon-reduction target, but if you are not prepared to stand up for human rights and broader values, and to press governments

to do so, it’s not enough. Climate action without human rights action is only half the job.

Third, it is still possible for Azerbaijan’s leaders to confound their critics. The government could set out a plan to pivot away from oil and gas. President Ilham Aliyev could initiate a program of reforms to bring his country closer to international human rights standards, starting with heeding international calls to release Armenian political prisoners who are currently being illegally detained, the most well-known being prominent businessman and humanitarian Ruben Vardanyan. President Aliyev would earn the respect and goodwill of the international community, and help Azerbaijan gain greater status on the world stage, a goal it is desperate to reach.

No government, not even the one in Baku, is immune to the influence of a united international community, or to businesses and investors prepared to take a stand. Our test now is to use this leverage effectively, to defend human freedom and keep our international climate effort on track.

(Paulus Polman is a Dutch businessman and author. He was the chief executive officer of Unilever. He is also the author of *Net Positive: How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take*. This commentary was originally published by Reuters on January 15.)



COMMENTARY

MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

Israel's Foreign Minister Tweets The Term Armenian Genocide: 'Too little, Too Late'

Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz reminded President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Armenian Genocide after the Turkish leader supported South Africa's complaint with the International Court of Justice (World Court) that Israel was committing genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza.

Foreign Minister Katz tweeted on January 12, 2024: "The president of Turkey Erdogan, from a country with the Armenian genocide in its past, now boasts of targeting Israel with unfounded claims. We remember the Armenians, the Kurds. Your history speaks for itself. Israel stands in defense, not destruction, against your barbarian allies."

Within the larger context of the Israel-Hamas conflict, Israel's reference to the Armenian Genocide to attack Turkey raises a number of important issues. After refusing for decades to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, Israel's Foreign Minister all of a sudden remembered the Armenian Genocide when it suited his country's interests. Here are my comments on his tweet:

1) Israeli Foreign Minister's reference to the Armenian Genocide cannot be considered a formal recognition which can only occur when the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) adopts a resolution acknowledging the Armenian Genocide.

2) This is not the first time that an Israeli Minister has referred to the Armenian Genocide. Three other past Israeli Ministers had made similar acknowledgements when they were serving in the government:

– Minister of Education Yossi Sarid stated on April 24, 2000, "I join you, members of the Armenian community, on your Memorial Day, as you mark the 85th anniversary of your genocide. I am here, with you, as a human being, as a Jew, as an Israeli, and as Education Minister of the State of Israel."

– Minister of Justice Yossi Beilin stated on April 24, 2000: "Something happened that cannot be defined except as genocide. One-and-a-half million people disappeared. It wasn't negligence, it was deliberate." Earlier, when serving as Deputy Foreign Minister in 1994, Beilin made a similar statement on the Armenian Genocide.

– Minister of Immigrant Absorption Yair Tsaban attended the Memorial Day ceremonies of the Armenian community in Israel in 1995 and urged the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

3) Nevertheless, Israel's Knesset attempted several times in recent decades to adopt a resolution to recognize the Armenian Genocide. Each time, the government of Israel blocked the resolution to appease Turkey.

4) It is unacceptable that Israel is using the Armenian Genocide as a bargaining chip in its problematic relations with Turkey. The State of Israel, as a nation of Holocaust survivors, should have been the first country, hopefully

not the last, to recognize the Armenian Genocide.

5) Equally unacceptable is the Israeli government's excuses for its denial of the Armenian Genocide. When relations are good between Israel and Turkey, Israeli officials say: "We don't wish to ruin our good relations with Turkey because of the Armenian Genocide." And when the relations are bad, as it is now, Israel declares: "We do not want to make our relations with Turkey worse by recognizing the Armenian Genocide." Israel has thus tarnished its reputation in the international community as a genocide denier.

6) Contrary to the Israeli government's denialism, individual Jews have been some of the leading voices calling attention to the Armenian Genocide: Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire (1913-1916); Franz Werfel, Austrian Jewish novelist, author of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*; Raphael Lemkin, Polish Jewish Lawyer, who coined the term genocide; Reuven Rivlin, former President of Israel when he was the Knesset Chairman; Professors Israel Charny, Yair Auron, and Yehuda Bauer; and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Elie Wiesel.

7) For years and more recently, Erdogan has used very harsh words to insult the Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, likening him to Hitler, and accusing him of being a 'war criminal and terrorist' who is committing genocide against the Palestinians. However, as in past conflicts, when the current crisis is over, Israel and Turkey will return to their earlier lovey-dovey relationship. Even at the height of this existing hostile situation, the two countries have continued their billions of dollars of trade, exchange of intelligence, and tourism.

8) Western Europe and the United States, by ignoring the Turkish leader's misdeeds within NATO and his warmongering in several regional conflicts, have spoiled Erdogan to such a degree that he knows he would be able to get away with anything he wanted to do without facing any consequences. Back in 2010, when a Turkish humanitarian flotilla was approaching Gaza to break Israel's blockade, Israel's military attacked the Turkish ship killing 10 Turks. Thereafter, Netanyahu issued an apology to Erdogan and paid \$20 million in compensation to the victims' families.

9) Even if Israel recognizes the Armenian Genocide, Armenians will not forget the billions of dollars of lethal weapons that Israel sold to Azerbaijan to kill and injure thousands of Armenian soldiers during the Artsakh War. Shockingly, even in the midst of the Israel-Gaza war, Israel has continued to sell additional sophisticated armaments to Azerbaijan, as several Azeri cargo planes have been seen leaving Israel loaded with such weapons.

The Israel Hayom newspaper published on January 14, 2024, an article by Nadav Shragai, titled: "Recognize the Armenian genocide now." The author boldly wrote: "The Israeli government's refusal to acknowledge the Armenian genocide is a clear case of blatant moral bankruptcy."

Back in 1989, when Netanyahu was Deputy Foreign Minister and had not yet lost his moral compass, had said: "There are issues that go beyond politics and diplomacy. Genocides are a clear case of this particular category."

Will the Real Azerbaijani Environmentalists Stand Up?

By Michael Rubin

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Azerbaijan preplanned the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh's indigenous Christian population. With proceeds from BP's multibillion Caspian deal and international assistance, President Ilham Aliyev purchased drones and artillery from Israel and Turkey to give Azerbaijan a military edge over Armenia. He feigned commitment to Minsk Group diplomacy to cover his intentions. Prior to the outbreak of the second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Aliyev even initiated several border skirmishes to test the waters, confirm Azerbaijan's readiness and probe Armenian weakness.

Azerbaijan quickly determined that the West was a paper tiger and so Aliyev viewed an attack on Nagorno-Karabakh not as a gamble, but rather a sure thing. So, on September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched full-scale, multi-front surprise attack timed to coincide with the centenary of the Ottoman invasion of independent Armenia.

In hindsight, the November 9, 2020 ceasefire had nothing to do with recommitment to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute peacefully. For Aliyev, it was about rearmament and resupply. President Vladimir Putin meanwhile hoped the pause would lead outraged Armenians to reverse the 2018 revolution and end Armenia's westward tilt.

When 13 months ago, Aliyev renewed his campaign of aggression, he took a page from Putin's playbook. Just as Russia invaded Crimea with men lacking uniforms or insignia to obfuscate and confuse the West, so too did Aliyev seek to confuse the West. Rather than men in black, Aliyev used self-described environmentalists to block the Lachin corridor, the ceasefire-designated lifeline for Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenians.

In press interviews with friendly Azerbaijani or Turkish journalists, the so-called environmentalists declared themselves to be independent activists motivated by the pollution caused by Armenian goldmining. That some Washington think tank analysts accepted such nonsense at face value shows either naïveté or willingness to amplify Azerbaijani propaganda as unregistered foreign agents. After all, according to Freedom House, Azerbaijan is among the world's most autocratic states. Independent civil society does not exist. Azerbaijan's Freedom House civil liberties score falls below the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and Myanmar (Burma) under the military junta. CivilNet, an independent Armenian platform dedicated to encouraging liberalism, transparency, and democracy, found that many of the so-called environmental activists were actually state officials closely tied to Aliyev's inner-circle. They served their purpose. They initiated the starvation of Nagorno-Karabakh's Christians and normalized the blockade. Ultimately, they set the stage for Aliyev to complete his conquest.

The irony, however, is that while Aliyev's environmentalists mobilized for an imaginary crisis, they are absent for the real environmental crises Azerbaijan faces. Consider, for example, goldmines controlled by Leyla Aliyeva, Ilham Aliyev's eldest daughter and Arzu Aliyeva, his younger legitimate daughter.

The Azerbaijani government awarded control of the Chovdar mining parcel to Leyla and Arzu through a series of shell companies stretching from Azerbaijan to the United Kingdom to Panama dating back to 2007. Between 2012 and 2016, the Aliyev daughters' stake in the \$2.5 billion mine increased from 11 percent to 56 percent.

The Aliyev family exists above the law and so Leyla

and Arzu sought to maximize profits at the expense of local safeguards. First, they used imminent domain to expel several dozen villagers from areas rich in gold. In 2016, several hundred Chovdar workers protested lack of salary payment by the Aliyev-controlled companies running the mine.

Any quiet over subsequent years was due to police tactics rather than acquiescence. Such placidity ended on June 20, 2023, when huge protests erupted near the Gadabay (Gedabek) gold mine. At issue was popular anger at the mining company dumping of cyanide-laced wastewater and poisoning local residents and their livestock. At least 17 children have died of rare cancers in the area.

The Azerbaijani government's reaction was telling. Out were the spontaneous protestors. In were the storm troopers who sealed off Soyudlu village, the epicenter of the environmental protests. Videos leaked showing Azerbaijani security forces pepper-spraying grandmothers. The police arrested and detained without charge scores of young men and even a former parliamentarian.

Neither Washington nor Yerevan should be silent. Aliyev cynically shielded his ethnic cleansing campaign behind a façade of environmentalism but, by so doing, he made environmentalism fair game for broader diplomatic discussion. The poisoning of wells and villagers in Azerbaijan represents criminal negligence on the part of both Leyla and Arzu Aliyeva, both of whom deserve prison for their environmental crimes under Azerbaijani law. What happens in Azerbaijani does not stay in Azerbaijani, however: Much of the Nagorno-Karabakh watershed drains into Lake Sevan.

Armenians should not simply wring their hands. The inconsistency of the Lachin activists and their failure to protest Soyudlu shows their motivation was never environmentalism but rather genocide. As such, it is time to designate every Azerbaijani involved in the Lachin blockade for their role in a criminal conspiracy to commit genocide.

(Michael Rubin is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC.)



Fourth Hye Hearts Dance to Take Place in Connecticut

HARTFORD, Conn. — The Hye Hearts Dance is set to take place on Saturday, January 27, at 8 p.m. at the Marriott Hartford/Windsor Airport Hotel in Windsor, Connecticut, 28 Day Hill Road.

This is the fourth Hye Hearts Dance, last taking place in 2019 prior to the COVID pandemic. This year’s event is hosted by the Tri-City Armenian Cultural Committee, consisting of the Armenian churches of Greater Hartford and Western Massachusetts - St. George of Hartford, CT, St. Gregory of Indian Orchard, MA, Holy Resurrection of New Britain, CT, St. Mark of Springfield, MA, and St. Stephen’s of New Britain.

Half of the proceeds from this year’s event will be donated to help refugees from Artsakh.

Hundreds of Armenians and those from the area have attended past Hye Hearts, dancing to the sounds of both a live Arme-

nian band and a DJ. The band will feature Harry Bedrossian on oud and vocals, Leon Janikian on clarinet, Bruce Gigargian on guitar, and Charlie Dermenjian on dumbeg, and DJ Impossible will play popular American and Armenian music.

The goal of the dance committee is to ensure that Armenian cultural traditions will continue into the future. The committee believes that keeping traditions alive is important so that we teach the next generation about our shared past.

The Hye Hearts Dance, which has traditionally taken place around the time of Valentine’s Day, is also named in honor of Saint Sarkis, the beloved Armenian Patron Saint of love and youth. According to tradition, on the eve of the feast of Saint Sarkis, young people eat salty biscuits and refrain from drinking water, so as to induce the appearance of their future bride or bridegroom in their dreams, bringing them



Some of the merrymakers in previous years.

water. Named Saint Sarkis Aghablit, this sweet pastry is widely eaten in Armenian communities to symbolize the blessings brought by the Saint.

Tickets are \$55 for adults and \$30 for students until January 20. After January 20 and at the door, tickets are \$65 for adults. Children 10 and under are free. Tickets can be purchased online at <https://hyehearts.eventbrite.com/>. Checks can also be made payable to TCCC and

mailed to event treasurer Gary Hovhannessian at 81 Cope Farms Road, Farmington, CT 06032. Reservations of tables of 10 may be reserved.

Mezze and desserts will be provided, and there will be a full cash bar. There will also be a raffle featuring prizes donated by hosting parishes and local businesses. For questions about the dance, contact Talene Jermakian at talenej@gmail.com or Gary Hovhannessian at garyhov@aol.com.

Armenian Film Makes Oscar Shortlist

OSCARS, from page 1

clashes broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“We had cast and crew that went and fought in that war. And so it was a challenge to make this film for sure. But all the obstacles we faced, I would say actually made it a better film,” Goorjian said.

As international tensions and economic downturn dominate the headlines, “Amerikatsi,” which premiered at the Woodstock Film Festival in 2022, has tapped into a human need for positivity.

“I’ve found with the film, people come up to me all the time and say ‘I miss feeling this way after a movie, feeling good,’” Goorjian said.

He will find out if “Amerikatsi” has made it from the shortlist and onto the 2024 Academy Awards nominations on Jan. 23.



Tekeyan Cultural Association

Sponsor a Teacher in Armenia

Since its inception in 2001, the Tekeyan Cultural Association (TCA) Sponsor a Teacher Program has raised 838,700 dollars and reached out to 7,386 teachers and school staff in Armenia and Artsakh. This year the program continues to support school teachers in Tekeyan Schools in Armenia, as well as teachers who had to flee Artsakh but continue teaching in Armenia’s schools, as they educate new generations of children, our future leaders.



YES, I would like to sponsor TCA school teacher(s) in Armenia, as well as teachers who fled Artsakh and continue teaching in Armenia schools, in order to continue helping them work and educate the children, our future leaders. I would like to have the sponsored teacher/s’ name(s) and address(es).

\$240 \$480 \$700 other _____

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