

Senators Markey, Cassidy Introduce Resolution Seeking Information on Azerbaijan’s Human Rights Violations

WASHINGTON — Senators Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) and Bill Cassidy (R-La.) introduced a bipartisan resolution on February 1 to require that the Secretary of State provide a report on Azerbaijan’s human rights practices, including concerning allegations of human rights violations committed against ethnic Armenians, such as unlawful killings, torture, restrictions on freedom of movement, the illegal detention of political prisoners, and ethnic cleansing. Rep. Adam Schiff (CA-30) introduced a companion version of the resolution in the House of Representatives.

Since Azerbaijan’s large-scale military offensive on September 19, 2023, against the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians have fled to Armenia in fear of further persecution. Before the attack, Azerbaijani forces blockaded the Lachin corridor, the sole road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the outside world, to prevent imports of essential goods, humanitarian convoys, and all passages of food, fuel, and medicine from the Red Cross to the ethnic Armenians that lived in the territory.



Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA) (left) and Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA)

“The need to hold Azerbaijan’s government accountable and forge a peaceful path forward is long overdue,” said Senator Markey. “Military action has never been the solution to peace and stability in Nagorno-Karabakh. This resolution puts pressure on Azerbaijan’s government to uphold human rights and stop committing crimes against ethnic Armenians in the region. We must protect the will, the rights, and the bedrock freedoms of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh.”

“Azerbaijan has already been bulldozing holy sites and starving Armenian communities. This is the type of country the Biden administration see SENATE, page 9

Armenia ‘Diversifying’ Arms Suppliers

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia is moving away from its heavy dependence on Russian weapons and other military equipment, according to Defense Minister Suren Papikyan.

In a weekend interview with Armenian Public Television, Papikyan said the Armenian government decided to “diversify” the country’s arms suppliers after Moscow failed to defend its South Caucasus ally against Azerbaijani military attacks in September 2022.

“We have made serious progress in this direction,” he said. “This process is irreversible, in the positive sense of the word. Current processes and contracts will significantly



Thales radar system

“In this process, we have also acquired new partners,” Papikyan said, singling out India and France.

Since September 2022, Armenia has reportedly signed a number of defense contracts with India worth at least \$400 million. The Armenian military is due to receive Indian artillery systems, anti-tank rockets and anti-drone equipment.

In October 2023, Armenia also signed two arms deals with France. One of them entitles it to buy three sophisticated radar systems from the French defense group Thales. Papikyan and his French counterpart Sebastien Lecornu also signed in Paris a “letter of intent” on the future delivery of French short-range surface-to-air missiles.

Yerevan had earlier signed contracts with Moscow for the delivery of Russian weapons worth \$400 million, according to Armenian officials. The latter repeatedly complained last year that the Armenian side has still not received any of those weapons. Two senior Armenian lawmakers said last month that Russia has shipped the first batch of that military hardware.



French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu and Armenian counterpart Suren Papikyan sign an agreement in Paris, October 23, 2023.

cantly change the quality of our army’s weapons in the future.”

Pashinyan Again Criticizes Armenia’s Independence Declaration

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan reiterated his criticism of a 1990 declaration of Armenia’s independence resented by Azerbaijan as he defended his plans to try to enact a new Armenian constitution on February 1.

The declaration made reference to a 1989 unification act adopted by the legislative bodies of Soviet Armenia and the then Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. It also called for international recognition of the 1915 genocide of Armenians “in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia.” The declaration is cited in a preamble to the current Armenian constitution adopted in 1995.

In an interview with Armenian Public Radio on February 1, Pashinyan gave

more indications that he wants to exclude this reference from the new constitution.

“We really need to settle our relations with the declaration today,” he said. “The question is whether our state policy should be referenced to it and whether our state policies should be guided by that message and based on the decision of the National Council of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Supreme Council of Armenia on the reunification of Karabakh and Armenia.”

“If so, it means we will never have peace. Furthermore, it means that we will now have war,” claimed Pashinyan.

Pashinyan did not deny Armenian opposition claims that he wants to change the see DECLARATION, page 2

Noubar Afeyan to Deliver MIT’s 2024 Commencement Address

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Noubar Afeyan (PhD ’87), an inventor and parallel entrepreneur with a penchant for bold ideas, will deliver the address at the OneMIT Commencement Ceremony on Thursday, May 30.

Afeyan is the founder and CEO of the venture creation company Flagship Pioneering, which founds companies that build biotechnology platforms to transform human health and sustainability. Since its founding in 2000, the company has built more than 100 science-based companies;



Dr. Noubar Afeyan

Flagship-founded companies currently have more than 60 drugs in clinical development.

One of Afeyan’s best-known successes is Moderna, which invented and produced an effective Covid-19 vaccine approved and deployed to billions of people in more than 70 countries. Currently the company’s chairman, he co-founded Moderna working with his team at Flagship and three academic co-founders in 2010, when the idea of using messenger RNA in therapies was virtually unheard of. But Afeyan has long been known for asking unconventional “What if?” questions and building companies with visionary goals. “Why wouldn’t you think you can actually change the world?” he said in a 2021 interview with *Forbes*.

“You might expect that after Moderna’s success in bringing lifesaving Covid-19 vaccines to the world, Noubar would rest on his laurels. But he isn’t that kind of entrepreneur,” says MIT President Sally Kornbluth. “In fact, he cautions that anyone seeking to benefit humanity on a large scale should avoid getting comfortable. He’s not afraid to make long-shot, long-term bets, investing in the most innovative science for the biggest impact. We are delighted to welcome Noubar to share his bold, dynamic outlook with the Class of 2024.”

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ARMENIA

## NEWS from ARMENIA

### Two Die, Two Injured in Yerevan Explosion

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Investigators believe the deadly explosion in Nor Aresh neighborhood on February 5 was caused by a resident igniting a lighter during a gas leak, the Investigative Committee said.

Two people were killed and two others were injured in the explosion.

Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan has vowed to support the families affected.

Two houses collapsed in the explosion while several others were damaged.

### USAID Provides \$1 Million In Additional Assistance

YEREVAN — The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has released an additional \$1 million for the refugees from Artsakh now in Armenia.

Due to this funding, 19,300 displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh sheltered in Ararat, Kotayk, Lori, Shirak, Syunik, Tavush provinces, and Yerevan will receive humanitarian support.

This initiative kicked off in Kanaker-Zeytun district, during which displaced persons received food and hygiene packages. US-AID/Armenia's Acting Deputy Mission Director Matthew Laird along with Anna Zhamakochyan, Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, and Liesbeth Zonneveld, Country Director of Democracy International Armenia joined in the event.

"Since late September 2023, US-AID has provided \$9.27 million to support those impacted by the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh," Laird said.

### Azerbaijan Again Creates False Narratives

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — Former Armenian Ombudsman Arman Tatoyan has debunked yet another false Azerbaijani narrative about Ashtarak and its churches, stating that Baku is paving the way for fresh aggression against Armenia.

"The agenda of adopting a new Constitution and changing the legislation in Armenia is necessary for Azerbaijan's authorities in order to divert attention from its crimes, including the forced displacement of Artsakh Armenians and the occupation of Armenian territories, and to legitimize them. Under the veil of this, they deepen the animosity plan towards Armenia, creating artificial grounds for aggression," he wrote on Facebook on February 5.

He said an Azerbaijani TV channel aired a program about Ashtarak, in Aragatsotn Province, falsely claiming it to be part of so-called "Western Azerbaijan" and the homeland of the Oghuz-Turkic tribes since "time immemorial".

"Moreover, along with Ashtarak, the ancient Armenian monastic complexes and churches located in that area are appropriated, stating that they are Turkish-Albanian monuments of the 5th century," said the ex-ombudsman, who currently runs the Tatoyan Foundation.

# Armenian Technology Firms Condemn Businessman's Arrest

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — An association of Armenian tech companies has condemned law-enforcement authorities for arresting the founder of one of its leading members, saying that the criminal case against him is another serious blow to Armenia's business reputation.

The Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises (UATE) said over the weekend that foreign and local investors have started viewing Armenia as a "risky country" following a spate of "unfounded detentions."

Ashot Hovanesyan, the owner of Synergy International Systems, was arrested last week along with two current and former employees of his software company as well as several Ministry of Economy officials as a result of a corruption investigation conducted by two law-enforcement agencies. Criminal charges brought against them stem from a procurement tender organized by the ministry and invalidated by an Armenian court last summer.

Synergy won the tender despite setting a much higher price for its services than an-



Ashot Hovanesyan inaugurates his Synergy International Systems company's branch in Vanadzor, March 11, 2022.

other bidder. According to the Investigative Committee, the latter was illegally disqualified by the indicted officials, notably former Deputy Economy Minister Ani Ispiryan.

The officials have been charged with abuse of power, rather than bribery. It is not yet clear what exactly Hovanesyan and his two subordinates are accused of.

Synergy, which is registered in the United States but mainly operates from Armenia, on Monday, February 5, strongly denied the accusations and demanded Hovanesyan's, senior company executive Lili Mkrian's and her former colleague Ani Gevorgian's immediate release from custody. It argued, in particular, that Synergy, which employs hundreds of software engineers, did not receive any government funds as a result of the invalidated tender.

In a weekend statement, the UATE said Hovanesyan's arrest followed an alarming



The Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises held its annual conference in Yerevan, February 1, 2024.

pattern of "business representatives and other prominent persons" being taken into custody on dubious charges lately.

"The vast majority of those criminal cases are closed for lack of evidence," it said. "Such treatment not only damages the reputation of these persons, the companies run by them or the whole sector, built up over the years, but also that of the Republic of Armenia, which has begun to be perceived as a risky country for making investments and starting a business."

"Such a short-sighted state attitude towards business representatives will ultimately force not only foreign but also local high-tech businesses to either stop their activities or to move to another country where all rights, including due process, are respected," warned the business association.

The information technology industry dominated by software developers has long been the most dynamic sector of the Armenian economy, having grown at double-digit annual rates since the early 2000s. The sector currently employs more than 30,000

people, including thousands of mostly young Russians who relocated to Armenia following Russia's February 24 invasion of Ukraine.

Significantly, Gevorgyan, the arrested former Synergy executive, is married to the brother of Alen Simonyan, the Armenian parliament speaker and a key political ally of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. This fact has fueled speculation about political motives behind the high-profile case. Some commentators claim that Pashinyan personally sanctioned the young woman's arrest in a bid to boost his falling approval ratings by showing Armenians that he is serious about combating corruption.

There have also been media reports that Simonian is increasingly at odds with other senior members of Pashinyan's Civil Contract party. The party's deputy chairman, Vahagn Aleksanyan, denied this on Friday.

Pashinyan pledged to separate business from politics when he swept to power in 2018. He claims to have significantly improved Armenia's business environment.

## Pashinyan Meets with US Ambassador

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with U.S. Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien on February 5.

During the meeting Pashinyan "attached importance to the continuous development of the Armenia-United States cooperation and underscored the United States' support aimed at the effective implementation of the democratic reforms in Armenia," his press office reported.

Pashinyan added that "the government of Armenia highly appreciates the United States' efforts in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and in the steps aimed at establishing stability in the region."

Pashinyan and Kvien also discussed issues pertaining to the strengthening of bilateral cooperation in various areas, as well as the Armenia-United States Strategic Dialogue. They also discussed the ongoing processes in the South Caucasus, the opportunities for unblocking regional infrastructures and the Crossroads of Peace project developed by the Armenian government.



Prime Minister Pashinyan with U.S. Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien

## Pashinyan Again Criticizes Armenia's Independence Declaration

DECLARATION, from page 1 constitution under pressure from Azerbaijan. He said at the same time that Baku is publicly demanding such a change in a bid to discredit the constitutional reform and eventually "weaken" Armenia.

He also admitted that the new constitution envisaged by him would not necessarily prevent Azerbaijani aggression.

Pashinyan's political opponents and other critics say that his continuing unilateral concessions to Baku only increase the risk of another war.





## ARMENIA

# Rooted Resilience: A Spotlight on an Armenia Tree Project Employee from Artsakh

In the Armenia Tree Project office in Yerevan, which is filled with the comforting aroma of tea, we sit down with Karen Aghajanyan, a displaced Artsakh resident, and now an ATP employee, to discuss his journey. Karen, among the 120,000 displaced, comes from Askeran in Artsakh. He now dedicates his skills to ATP's Backyard Nursery Program.

His profound connection to the land which was cultivated through generations, faced a tumultuous turn when conflict swept through Artsakh, encircling it in a blockade. Our conversation explores the trials of life amid the blockade, subsequent war and exodus, and the resilience needed to rebuild after bidding farewell to one's homeland. Drawing on his extensive background, including overseeing agriculture in Askeran and serving as the former Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Karen shares experiences and insights, notably his role in ATP's impactful Backyard Greenhouse Project in his native region.

**Can you describe your personal experiences during the blockade, particularly how you navigated the challenges and what impact it had on your life?**

I was in Yerevan when the blockade started. I had come for a medical appointment on December 11, 2022, intending to return the next day. However, the roads closed and I was stranded in Goris for 27 days. I joined a group of fellow Artsakhtsis, navigating a military-designed route through forests and rocky mountains to get back home. Despite the difficulty, the urgency to get to my family drove me forward and, thankfully, we were reunited.

Initially, we believed the blockade would be short-lived, but it persisted till the very end. Food shortages were severe. Villagers with stored provisions managed to endure, but city dwellers faced more dire circumstances. Urban living became increasingly challenging due to a shortage of fuel. The limited supply was used sparingly, mainly for essential agricultural tasks like harvesting.

The scarcity of bread became critical as our enemies actively prevented the harvesting of wheat fields, resorting to gunfire against field workers. Before the 2020 war, Artsakh produced over 100,000 tons of wheat, significantly impacting Armenia's economy. The loss of Artsakh is not just an economic setback, it's a huge blow to our security as well, with Azeris now not only at the border but also encroaching on Armenian territory.

For over a month, trucks carrying humanitarian aid from Armenia were stranded at the border, denied entry. On September 18, two Red Cross trucks from Azerbaijan were finally allowed into Stepanakert, however, war erupted the next day, prompting our evacuation. The Azeri forces approached populated areas, with Martuni and Martakert experiencing atrocities as their roads to Stepanakert were sealed. They entered villages, taking hostages, causing fatalities. They had completely encircled Artsakh, and while we resisted and inflicted damage, fighting to the end would have resulted in everyone's demise, especially with no assistance from Armenia or any other country—no help was expected or received.

**Did you ever foresee a situation where everyone would be compelled to leave?**

If Artsakh wasn't surrounded and if there had been an open corridor to Armenia, nobody would have left. The encirclement left us with no choice—either integrate or leave. Not even in our worst nightmares did we imagine the entire population leaving, but the circumstances forced us.

Of course, integration was out of the question due to the recent conflicts and atrocities. The vast difference in

civility and society levels makes reconciliation impossible with Azeris. The brutal methods they employ, such as beheadings, mirror historical aggression against us. They undergo constant indoctrination and are taught from a young age that Armenians are enemies. Their leaders perpetuate distorted historical narratives, denying Armenians' ancient heritage, which hinders any possibility of reconciliation.

The war and tragic gas depot explosion created an incredibly challenging situation. Many, like myself, have experienced every war since the 90's and have no desire for more. Witnessing the losses and tragedies, including fathers, sons, and children in the same family, has made people reluctant to endure further conflict and to subject their descendants to such situations. The toll is too great.

**Can you describe your displacement and arrival in Armenia?**

We departed for Armenia on September 25, just a day after the road opened. It took us 30 hours to get here by car, with limited belongings—mainly clothing and some food. Our main concern was the future, pondering where we would live and how we would sustain ourselves. We faced no major issues on the road, although others weren't as fortunate, encountering theft and interrogations by Azeri military. After a day in Goris and about



Karen Aghajanyan

10 days in Abovyan, we settled in Yerevan, where we currently reside.

**What was the hardest part?**

Abandoning our ancestral home, large enough for 20-30 people. In hindsight it becomes even more difficult, as we realize that we left behind the culmination of generations' efforts, including the resting places of our forebears.

My grandmother used to share stories of escaping the Turkish attacks in 1918-1920, where they sought refuge in the next village. A similar pattern unfolded in the 90's. However, in the recent conflict, the Azeri military's advanced weaponry eliminated any possibility of escape or hiding within villages. It's painful that, for the first time in history, there's no Armenian left in Artsakh, and with no way back.

**What key factors are essential for displaced families to be able to rebuild a sustainable life here?**

Many, like myself, wish to remain in Armenia. The primary challenge for displaced families is securing stable work and housing. Without government support, ongoing rent expenses make sustainability difficult. While there's talk of programs or neighborhoods for Artsakhtsis, nothing concrete has materialized. If displaced Artsakhtsi families in Armenia can secure stable housing, it would significantly deter migration. Providing a home is often enough to encourage families to stay.

**What led you to work with the Armenia Tree Project?**

In early September 2021, I met with Jeanmarie (ATP

Executive Director), to discuss the proposed Backyard Greenhouse Project in Artsakh. I had helped them build and manage the project. I met again with Jeanmarie in October 2023 to discuss the fate of the project and of Artsakh. During the meeting, they offered me a job with the NGO, and without much hesitation, I accepted. I was already familiar with the organization and its mission. Currently, I'm working on the Backyard Nursery Program, which aligns well with my profession. I appreciate the opportunity to visit provinces daily and meet people, many of whom have been refugees, so we share a unique understanding of each other's experiences. Helping them becomes a way for me to find some peace and purpose.

**Can you provide insights into your background and what life was like in Artsakh before?**

I spent all my sixty years in Askeran, where I was born and raised. It had been home to not just me but also my parents and grandparents. We were four siblings - two sisters, two brothers. I remained in my father's house. I graduated from the Armenian National Agrarian University in Yerevan, and chose to return to Askeran immediately after, despite tempting offers to stay. Living in Artsakh offered favorable conditions for both life and work. The nature was incredibly abundant, with almost no winter in Askeran. After a few days of snow, warmth would return, making life there easy and enjoyable.

I was responsible for curating agriculture in Askeran District. And prior to that I worked in the Ministry of Agriculture as the Deputy Minister. I helped manage agricultural programs throughout Artsakh. The region's milder climate allowed for diverse agricultural pursuits, although vegetable production traditionally lagged. Historically, Artsakhtsi's mostly dealt with animal farming and viticulture, which was very much developed. There was huge potential and lots of progress being made.

In recent years, I collaborated with organizations like Armenia Tree Project and Green Lane NGO to establish 24 backyard greenhouses in Askeran, providing families with valuable training to cultivate vegetables. It was a crucial contributor to food security and self-sustainability within the community. I think it was in August of 2021 when ATP first came to us with the project. Our reaction was very positive, and in just a few months we started construction. It was a great experience for the families to start small. They were motivated, and getting new ideas for adding crops and expanding, but of course, everything was disrupted. During the blockade, we received potato seeds and the greenhouses emerged as a beacon of sustenance, providing nourishment to many when food was scarce.

**Did you personally engage in cultivation, aside from your involvement in the greenhouse project?**

I used my free time after work to grow a variety of crops, supplying my family and relatives. We had excellent apples all year round, particularly the delightful 'Pink Lady', a delicious variety that I brought from the US. I grew pears, persimmons, as well as staple crops like wheat, corn.

**Could you share more details about your family and current living arrangements?**

I have two sons; one of them is married and has my only grandchild, Karen Jr. They currently live with me as my son and his wife continue their job search. My grandson tells me, "Let's go back to Askeran, I don't like it here". Unfortunately, there's no space at the kindergartens and long waiting lists. Currently, we reside in a rented apartment in Komitas, Yerevan. Without our own home, the future is uncertain, and I can't predict how long we'll stay in our current situation or what lies ahead for us.

**When you contemplate the future, what are your thoughts and aspirations?**

My hope centers around my children, the youth. Having lived most of my life already, my primary concern is for them and their future, hoping they can stand on their own two feet.

**As a concluding question, we always like to ask: Which tree holds a special place in your heart?**

I'm especially fond of the platanus tree. It brings back memories of home in Askeran, where 60-70-year-old plane trees dotted the landscape and were visible from every corner. The longevity of the plane tree resonates with me, and in our region, we call it 'Tnjri.'





ARMENIA

# Esthetic Joys Embassy: A Self-Proclaimed Cultural Nexus

By Victoria Ren

*Special to the Mirror-Spectator*

YEREVAN — Situated in the heart of Yerevan, Esthetic Joys Embassy is an eclectic bar where diverse worlds converge. Repats, expats, travelers and locals all unite here under grapevines and a vivid flag that says PACE, which means “peace” in Italian.

When walking halfway uphill on Baghramyan Avenue — one of the main streets of Yerevan — you face the National Assembly on the left. On the right, there’s a bright pink bar with a Cyrillic sign indicating the initials “ПЮ” amidst lush greenery. Both buildings are connected by a long, narrow sidewalk at Galoyan Yeghbayrner street. It is dark and calm, illuminated on both ends. One end is part of the



Armenian governmental structure, and the other is an entertainment hub established by Russian expats.

At 72 Sarmen Street, the specific location of the bar, three Moscow-based enterprises joined forces to establish what would become a cultural nexus in the heart of Yerevan. The venue, whose initials stand for the name Esthetic Joys Embassy in Russian, is a collaborative effort of Esthetic Joys—an event company, “Рюмочная Мечты” [Rumochnaya Mechty, or Dream Shots, in the sense of alcoholic drinks] — a bar specializing in shots, and Rovesnik — another popular Moscow-based bar. Together, they have created a unique space with recognizable pink walls, setting it apart from any existing counterparts in Yerevan.

Originally, the plan was to launch the Esthetic Joys Embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia. However, none of the buildings seemed suitable, as they were either located in residential areas or in more underground settings. Eventually, the team decided to explore Yerevan for the perfect location, and surprisingly, found it quite quickly.

The current building of the Esthetic Joys Embassy was once the residence of the ambassador of Morocco. Later on, it turned into a Dutch underground members-only club and then an IT office. The buildings on Sarmen Street, which leads up to the American University of Armenia, are quite similar: two-story, with a small garden, Soviet-style windows, and squeaky metallic doors, reminiscent of a simple schema straight from the ’90s.

Just before entering the bar, one can easily notice the diverse communities that unite here with no boundaries, hate, or disrespect

toward each other. The former bouncer at Esthetic Joys Embassy was a man about 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a long, slightly gray beard and a slightly wrinkled face featuring a noticeable crease between his eyebrows. The guy would initially startle customers with his excessive number of accessories in the shape of a skull, yet he would always be welcoming to newly arrived visitors.

On most Fridays, one might see three to five Slavic-looking men smoking next to the entrance. They have a distinctive style that is atypical in Yerevan: funky socks and bright jackets, with some also sporting shoulder-length dirty blonde hair tied in a ponytail. All this materializes next to bouncers dressed head-to-toe in black with aquiline noses and short buzz cuts, who carry packs of strong domestic cigarettes.

Lots of Russians started coming to the bar at first because the founding companies behind it are well-known in Moscow. That’s why the bar quickly became popular among Russian clientele.

“Initially, we were a hub for Russian expats simply because a Russian team was in charge of it. The ratio was 80% Russians and 20% locals who were curious about a new noisy place. However, now it is a place for everyone in the city [Yerevan] and country. Sometimes I come here and see no Russians at all. It is pleasant to witness how we managed to become a part of the Armenian community as well,” says Yakushev, the head of social media marketing and public relations, whose roots are from both Russia and Ukraine.

Upon entering, a whole new world opens up, very different from the regular party scene of Yerevan. At Esthetic Joys Embassy Bar, people do not gather just to party. Due to the planning of the space, there are open and closed-off areas for activities which give various options to visitors from which to choose: to enjoy oneself and drink and make small talk outside, or dance the night away inside.

The most interesting social interactions happen in the garden located behind the second story of the bar, the small smoking corner next to the veranda, and the adjacent bar area. These places are quieter but still crowded with people speaking Russian, Arabic, French, English, German, and many other languages.

“I love that different people come here. Foreigners, relocated people, locals — a very interesting mix, and that’s what makes this place so special,” says the bartender Elizar from Karachaevo-Cherkessia in a low-pitched serious tone. At first glance, the bartender seemed to have quite Armenian-looking sharp features. His long black beard contrasted with a juvenile set of tattoos on his fingers which included a sun with a smiley face, clouds, and flowers.

Later on, the bartender proceeds to reminisce about one of the most memorable shifts he had working at the bar: “There was one night, when I vividly remember



a vogue ball was happening with lots of creative people dancing, in explosions of glitter. There were some people of an older generation who definitely did not share the same excitement towards that event, yet they stayed, enjoyed their drinks and did not show any anger.”

Indeed, while interviewing the personnel to record their observations, a group of six serious-looking Armenian men walked into the bar. All of them dressed neatly in cashmere sweaters with a zipper, fur coats, some wearing a signature black or grey cap straight from the “Mer Bak” [Our Courtyard] film series. They acted as if they were at a regular tavern in the city center. The personnel were not surprised, as if after a year of operation it became the norm here. Meanwhile, that group of not-so-young gentlemen did not mind guys with ear piercings or colored hair.

“This place is against ageism, discrimination on a racial basis. We welcome everyone who shares our core values, no matter what their background is,” adds Yakushev with great animation.

“There’s a mix of relocated Russians from the creative sector (whether art, media, or IT) plus Yerevan artsy crowds plus *qyarts* [local gangsters], with all different age groups, but predominantly 25-35, I feel. It’s the most eclectic spot in Yerevan, where *qyarts* can be friends with the

small bar on Sarmen Street. On multiple occasions, one group of young Armenian repats from various parts of the world — Lebanon, Syria, Australia, the US, Russia, and the EU — was observed here. They all possessed distinct cultural backgrounds, fluency in either Western or Eastern Armenian, and could easily engage with visitors from the Commonwealth of Independent States, overcoming any language barriers. On one occasion, they encountered a tall, slightly tanned man wearing a keffiyeh, who turned out to be a backpacker from Iraq. The Arabic-speaking repats exchanged a few phrases in Arabic, while English and Russian speakers looked on in amazement.

Armenians who were raised outside of their homeland often are well-versed not only in their mother tongue but in several other languages. Meanwhile, while Russian expats are slowly adapting to not just the culture but the Armenian language, they find ways to communicate with customers from different parts of the world.

“As an Armenian repat from a non-Russian-speaking country, it’s quite unusual for me to be a loyal customer of an almost [fully] Russian-speaking spot, but here we are! I like this place most for a few reasons. First, it reminds me of some of my favorite cafes in my home country. They also have great cocktails, filter coffee, and ambiance. And the Russian part? I’ve started understanding a little Russian, the staff has started learning Armenian, and English is always a third choice. They get me every single time, and I’m not complaining,” says a young repat from the Middle East, who asked to keep his identity undisclosed.

No language barriers, politics, or gender identification can create divisions in this pink bar. It’s fascinating how effortlessly people find harmony here.

“I feel like it’s the environment it creates, where people engage in deep conversations. This experience is unique and special,” adds an Australian-Armenian who relocated from Sydney to Yerevan about two years ago.

Cultivating such a diverse clientele was not part of the founders’ original plan. Moreover, they certainly did not anticipate days when there would be no Russian visitors at all, only non-Russians. When Esthetic Joys Embassy first



opened, the owners could not have imagined that a small house would eventually become a hub connecting so many diverse cultures here in Yerevan. The paved pathway leading to the cultural nexus appears to also create a link with the National Assembly — a connection between two independently functioning structures supporting life in this country.

Indeed, worlds that might seem incompatible in their natural settings find a way to communicate despite challenges at this





## INTERNATIONAL

# Civic Museum of Bari Hosts Event On Armenian Saints in Italy

BARI, Italy (Armenpress) — An event titled “San Biagio: un Santo, una Storia, un popolo” (“San Biagio: a saint, a story, a people”) took place on February 3 at the Civic Museum of Bari (Puglia, Italy). It was a conference focusing on Armenian Saints in Italy, particularly about Saint Blaise, (Sourp Vlas) a bishop and martyr of Sebaste.

The event was organized by the Presidency Council Commission on Culture of the Municipality of Bari in collaboration with the Armenian Community of the city. The event commenced with opening remarks by the president of Commission, Dr. Giuseppe Cascella, the mayor's delegate for the pandemic emergency, Dr. Loredana Battista, and Dr. Dario RupenTimurian, the representative of the Armenian Community in Bari. Timurian announced next set of conferences dedicated to Armenian culture.

Timurian read a message from the Ambassador of Armenia to Italy Tsovinar Hambardzumyan. In her message, Hambardzumyan emphasized that “the events connecting Puglia and Armenia are always numerous and cover various areas of interest.” She called Saint Blaise as “one of the most famous figures linked to Armenian culture in Italy.”

In conclusion, the ambassador sent her greetings to the speakers. She referred to the families of our compatriots, Timurian and Lilosian, who have lived in Bari for a hundred years, and she mentioned the Armenian citizen prof. Carlo Coppola. Finally she conveyed her regards to the descendants of Father Francesco Divittorio

from Rutigliano (near Bari), a Franciscan killed in Mujukderesi (near Marash) on 23 January 1920 while defended 20 Armenian orphans entrusted to him. The representatives of Divittorio family were present at the event together with the mayor of

dition. Prof. Nicola Cutino analyzed the cultural and popular tradition about Saint Blaise in Puglia and South of Italy. Our compatriot prof. Carlo Coppola, provided a brief overview of Armenian saints in Italy, covering ancient and contemporary



A scene from the Bari event on Armenian saints

Rutigliano Municipality, Dr. Giuseppe Valenzano who recalled the life of the martyr and publicly invited Armenian authorities to visit his city.

After the introduction, the speakers explained to the audience the importance of San Biagio and the Armenian Saints in Italy over the centuries, encompassing religious, historical, artistic, and scientific perspectives.

The first speaker was Prof. Aldo Luisi, a well-known Latinist and professor emeritus of the University of Bari. He discussed the Latin and Eastern hagiographic tra-

ditions.

The conference was concluded by two reports on the presence of Saint Blaise in art and science: Dr. Siranush Quaranta spoke about of Saint Blaise in Puglia and in particular, the frescoed rock church of Saint Blaise in San Vito dei Normanni (near Brindisi). Prof. Dr. Matteo Gelardi, president of the Italian Academy of Nasal Cytology, the representative of the illustrious Italian Society of Otolaryngology, told about the relationships between the otolaryngologist and his patron saints Saint Biagio and Saint Cono.

## UC London Diplomatic Society Members Visit Armenian Embassy in London

LONDON — On February 1, the Embassy of Armenia in the United Kingdom welcomed members of the Diplomatic Society from University College London for an insightful discussion with Ambassador Varuzhan Nersesyan.

The event marked an opportunity for the students to engage directly with Amba-

sador Nersesyan, gaining unique perspectives on Armenia's foreign policy, bilateral relations between Armenia and the United Kingdom, and the broader geopolitical landscape. The Ambassador shared insights into Armenia's rich cultural heritage, its strategic importance in the region, and the ongoing efforts to strengthen diplomat-

ic ties with the UK.

The gathering served as a platform for constructive dialogue, allowing students to pose thought-provoking questions and engage in meaningful discussions on topics ranging from diplomacy and international affairs to cultural exchange and cooperation.

During the discourse, Nersesyan shed light on the recent ethnic cleansing perpetrated against the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh from their ancestral homeland. He emphasized Armenia's unwavering commitment to peace and reiterated the necessity for constructive dialogue and international mediation efforts to secure a just and lasting resolution.

Expressing his gratitude for the opportunity to connect with potential future leaders in diplomacy, Ambassador Nersesyan highlighted the importance of fostering such exchanges to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between nations. He commended the enthusiasm demonstrated by the members of the Diplomatic Society and encouraged them to continue their pursuit of knowledge and engagement in global affairs.



Ambassador Varuzhan Nersesyan, center, with the members of the Diplomatic Society

## INTERNATIONAL

### Armenia Officially Becomes ICC Member

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — On February 8, the International Criminal Court (ICC) held a ceremony at the seat of the Court in The Hague to welcome the Republic of Armenia as the 124th State Party to the Rome Statute, the ICC's founding treaty.

On February 1 Armenia formally joined the ICC. Armenia signed the Rome Statute in 1999 but did not ratify it, citing contradictions with the country's constitution.

The Constitutional Court last March said that those obstacles had been removed after Armenia's adoption of a new Constitution in 2015.

Last November, Yerevan formally deposited its instrument of ratification of the Rome Statute.

### Red Cross Representatives Visit POWs in Azerbaijan

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited Armenian detainees in Azerbaijan in the end of January and in the beginning of February this year, ICRC Armenia representative Zara Amatuni said on February 5.

She said that ICRC visited the captives who are acknowledged by Azerbaijan.

“These are regular visits which are agreed upon with the authorities of the given country,” she said.

The ICRC personnel reviewed the detention conditions and health of the captives and enabled them to contact their families.

A top law enforcement official in Armenia had earlier said that 55 Armenians are currently held in Azerbaijan but Baku has so far acknowledged only 23 of them.

### Hungary, Armenia Rebuild Relations as President Visits

BUDAPEST (Armenpress) — Hungary wants Armenia to strengthen its relations with the European Union, Hungarian President Katalin Novák said at a joint press conference with her visiting Armenian counterpart, Vahagn Khachatryan, on February 6.

“We want Armenia to strengthen its relations with the European Union. You can count on us. When Hungary takes over the presidency of the European Union in July, we will do everything to support Armenia and its relations with the EU, as well as to advance the visa liberalization process for Armenia,” noted Novák, adding that the European Union should strengthen its relations with the South Caucasus, and Hungary can be useful in that regard.

Novák expressed hope that the two countries will be able to intensify their relations.

“The last time an Armenian president visited [Hungary] was in 2009, while this is the first presidential visit after the change of the political system,” Novák said. “I hope that we will be able to change this trend and intensify our relations and have more official visits between our countries. There is readiness on our side and I hope that on your side as well.”





INTERNATIONAL

# Azerbaijan Removed Cross from Church in Artsakh’s Martakert

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — Photos posted on Azerbaijani social media platforms on February 6 show the cross of the Vankasar Church in Artsakh’s Martakert region has been removed.

The Azerbaijani propaganda machine falsely claims the church was originally the heritage of Caucasian Albania, Cultural Ombudsman of Hayk Hovik Avanesov warns.

“This is yet another evidence that Azerbaijan is carrying out state-sponsored cultural genocide in occupied Artsakh,” he wrote on Facebook.

Avanesov cited Article 4 of the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict which prohibits any act of vandalism, theft, robbery or misappropriation of cultural property in any form, and also imposes an absolute ban on any acts of revenge against cultural property.

“Moreover, according to PACE [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe] Resolution 2583, denying the Armenian cultural heritage and attributing them to Caucasian Albanians was recognized as an ‘Azerbaijani fiction,’” the expert added.



Before and after pictures of the Vankasar Church in Martakert



# Airports and Emptiness: Inside the Azerbaijani Districts Recaptured from Armenia

By Amos Chapple

BAKU (RFE/RL) — Azerbaijan’s Fuzuli International airport bustled with journalists and minders on October 26, 2021, when President Ilham Aliyev opened the facility alongside his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Since then, the new airport has stood largely empty.

A year after its opening, Azerbaijan reported around one plane arriving per week to the \$44 million Fuzuli facility. Thus far in 2024, flight tracking websites show zero arrivals or departures.

Seventy kilometers northeast of Fuzuli, another sleek international airport was opened near Zangilan in October 2022. And in the mountains near Lachin, a third airport is under construction.

The airports are part of a massive construction drive in territory recaptured from ethnic Armenians following the Second Karabakh War launched by Baku in 2020, and Azerbaijan’s final takeover of the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.

Baku has touted the developments as part of a “great return to Azerbaijan’s liberated territories” for hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis who fled advancing

Armenian forces in the 1988-94 war over Nagorno-Karabakh that was fought as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Azerbaijani economist Toghrul Valiyev told RFE/RL that the vast scale of the projects in the isolated regions may in part be due to various branches of the Azerbaijani state drumming up ideas to win easy funding.

“Every government agency is trying to take part in the distribution of billions of dollars of funds,” Valiyev says.

Baku set aside \$3.1 billion in 2023 for reconstruction in the recaptured areas.

As examples of what he describes as “creative” ideas for spending in the isolated regions, Valiyev says, “The Ministry of Agriculture comes up with a ‘smart village,’ even though the construction of cities and villages should be carried out by other bodies.”

“AZAL (Azerbaijan Airlines) recommends the construction of the airport in Zangilan,” the economist adds, “even though literally an hour’s drive in one direction (albeit in Armenia), and a couple of hours in the other direction, there are already airports.”

Almost the entire ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh of around 100,000 people fled to Armenia in Sep-

tember 2023 after Baku launched a military offensive that brought the breakaway region under Azerbaijani control.

Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but was populated for centuries by ethnic Armenians.

Hikmet Hajiyev, an adviser to President Aliyev, claimed that Nagorno-Karabakh’s ethnic Armenians left voluntarily, saying, “We opened the gate and respected

In official photos released by Azerbaijan, Armenian cultural heritage is conspicuous in its absence.

Maghakyan, who has extensively researched open-source imagery of the recaptured regions, says “access to Nagorno-Karabakh appears to be tightly controlled, even for Azerbaijani tourists or former residents.”

Several Azerbaijani media members who recently visited the recaptured re-



Employees but no passengers at the Fuzuli airport



Apartment construction in Shushi (now called Shusha by Azerbaijan)

their freedom of movement, freedom of choice.”

But months of blockades of the region that preceded the military offensive — and several alleged murders of ethnic Armenians who fell into the hands of Azerbaijani soldiers — led to international legal experts viewing the exodus as an act of coercion that amounted to a war crime.

As of October 2023, only around 2,000 Azerbaijanis had returned to the empty regions. Baku said it aims to resettle some 150,000 people by 2027.

Armenian-American researcher Simon Maghakyan, who exposed Azerbaijan’s nearly complete destruction of Armenian Christian heritage in the exclave of Nakhichevan, believes the massive construction projects may in some cases be being used as “cover for the ongoing erasure” of some of the thousands of Armenian historical sites in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.

gions declined to comment to RFE/RL on what one described as “such a sensitive topic” in the wake of a wave of arrests of journalists in recent weeks.

In December 2021, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) made a provisional ruling that Azerbaijan needed to “punish and prevent” the destruction of Armenian monuments.

Before the ICJ’s 2021 provisional ruling, one of Nagorno-Karabakh’s most iconic buildings, the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral, had its spire shorn down to a byzantine-like dome after its capture by Azerbaijani forces.

Since the ICJ’s decision, observers say Baku appears to have been relatively restrained in its treatment of cultural sites, and there is some hope that the prominent Armenian cultural heritage that remains could survive if satellite monitoring and international pressure can continue.





# Community News

## Presentation of St. Nerses Shnorhali Medals in Burbank

BURBANK, Calif. — On Sunday, January 21, the eve of the Fast of the Catechumens, Very Rev. Fr. Yeremia Abgaryan celebrated the Divine Liturgy and delivered the sermon at St. Leon (Ghevontians) Armenian Cathedral. With the Diocesan Primate Archbishop Hovnan Derderian presiding over the service, the spiritual center of the Western Diocese was filled with hundreds of faithful who participated in the service. Among the Diocesan clergy participating in the service were the Very Rev. Fr. Dajad Dz. V. Yardemian, Archpriest Fr. Sarkis Petoyan, the Rev. Fr. Mikayel Kyureghyan, and the Rev. Fr. Nzhdeh Keshishyan. During the service, Archbishop Hovnan Derderian called forth to the nave Aida Askejian and her spouse Markar Askejian, Aida Sethian and her spouse Dr. Nubar Sethian, and Ara Babayan and her spouse Sonia Sumbulian Babayan.

The Primate introduced the honorees to the parishioners, informing the congregants about the selfless and unwavering service of the distinguished individuals rendered to the Armenian Apostolic Church. In recognition of their Christian zeal, unrelenting dedication, and steadfast sup-



Ara Babayan receives his award from Archbishop Hovnan Derderian

port of the mission of the Armenian Church, Aida Askejian, Aida Sethian, and Ara Babayan were honored with the Pontifical Encyclical of Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II and were presented with the prestigious St. Nerses Shnorhali (the Graceful) medals.

In his remarks, the Diocesan Primate commended the honorees' loyalty and commitment to serving Christ, our Lord, upholding the sacred traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Church and staunch belief and support of the Stewardship Program of the Western Diocese which pursues the God-pleasing mission of educating and preparing the future wave of Diocesan clergy through to shepherd the flock of Christ.

The service was followed by a Stewardship luncheon in the Nazareth and Sima Kalaydjian Hall in honor of the medal recipients. It was attended by Diocesan Council Chairman Vartan Nazerian and his wife, Chairman of the Stewardship Committee Derik Ghookasian, and his

see BABAYAN, page 8



From left, Simon Maghakyan, Jackie Abramian, Sonya Nersessian and Tamar Purut

## Armenian Church at International Religious Freedom Summit Spotlights Ethnic Cleansing of Artsakh

WASHINGTON — The Eastern and Western Dioceses of the Armenian Church of North America participated at the annual International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit January 29 through February 2, and the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC. The collaborative efforts helped raise public awareness about Azerbaijan's September 2023 invasion and consequent ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Christian Armenian population of Artsakh, and the continued threats against the Republic of Armenia.

During and following the national gatherings, the Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin Ecumenical Director Archbishop Vicken Aykazian of the Eastern Diocese and the Western Diocese's Artsakh Heritage Committee volunteer member and investigative researcher on Azerbaijan's erasure of Armenian heritage, Simon Maghakyan, joined community leaders to spearhead a series of discussions on religious rights violations perpetrated against Armenians by Azerbaijan throughout 2023.

see SUMMIT, page 8



From left, Simon Maghakyan, Sonya Nersessian, Archbishop Vicken Aykazian, Jackie Abramian, Meghri Avakian, Karen Tonoyan and Tamar Purut

## St. Vartan Cathedral Hosts NYC's Annual Prayer for Christian Unity

NEW YORK — Distinguished church leaders from throughout New York City gathered at St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral on Thursday evening, January 25, for the city's annual "Prayer Service for Christian Unity."

The Eastern Diocese hosted this year's gathering as part of its celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America. Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan welcomed guests from more than a dozen Christian traditions — Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox — to the Diocese's mother cathedral, which was enveloped in scaffolding as it undergoes an exterior restoration.

Inside, a spirit of warm collegiality prevailed among the clergy and faithful of various churches — many of them longtime friends of the Armenian cathedral, others visiting for the first time.

Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church delivered a powerful homily based on the theme for this year's Unity service, drawn from the Gospel of Luke: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul; with all your strength, and all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27).

Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, offered closing remarks and an uplifting benediction.

Among the other dignitaries in attendance were Archbishop Demetrios (Greek Orthodox Church), Archbishop Mor Dionysius John Kawak (Syriac Orthodox Church), Bishop David (Coptic Orthodox Church), Bishop Paul Egensteiner (Evangelical Lutheran Church), Fr. Chad Hatfield (representing Metropolitan Tikhon), Fr. Sahag Yemishian (representing Archbishop Anoushavan Tanielian), Rev. Julie Hoplemazian (representing Bishop Matthew Heyd), Rev. Nicolas Kazarian (representing Archbishop Elpidophoros) — and other brothers and sisters from the broad range of Christian traditions in the metropolitan area.

Bishop Mesrop set a tone of harmony and hope in his welcoming words. "On top of the cathedral — hidden from view now, but still pulsing with power — is the Cross: the great symbol of our Unity as Christians, and of God's love," he said. "Grounded in the earth, but reaching up to Heaven; extending its arms out to each side, as if to join hands with our neighbors. The Cross is the very image of the beautiful Gospel verse that is our theme for tonight.... Needless to say, our quest for true Unity is more urgent than ever. Because Christian unity is the foundation for—and indeed the road to—the unity of all mankind. Without the one, we cannot even hope for the other."

A reception in Haik and Alice Kavookjian Auditorium followed the service. The event was part of the annual "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," which has been a feature of New York's religious life since 1908.



## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Armenian Church at Int'l Religious Freedom Summit Spotlights Ethnic Cleansing of

SUMMIT, from page 7

"The Western Diocese was pleased to return to Washington and partner again with the IRF Summit to spotlight critical issues concerning global religious freedoms and human rights violations, particularly those impacting the 120,000 forcibly displaced Christian Artsakh Armenians," remarked H.E. Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, Primate of the Western Diocese.

"We are pleased that our committee continues to build greater understanding among international religious freedom stakeholders regarding the ongoing existential threats facing the Armenians, and are hopeful that our allies will be even more proactively attentive in their efforts to hold Azerbaijan accountable for their ethnic cleansing crimes. We hope there will be increased support for humanitarian aid for the Artsakh refugees as we work toward the right of safe return and preempt further aggression against the Republic of Armenia," concluded Archbishop Derderian.

In addition to Aykazian and Maghakyan, the Diocesan delegation at the IRF Summit 2024 included freelance journalist/social justice activist Jackie Abramian, scholar Tamar Purut — who managed an information booth on Artsakh heritage — and attorney Sonya Nersessian, on behalf of the Armenian Bar Association which has been actively involved since 2020 in the legal documentation of cultural heritage destruction and religious freedom violations.

Among high-profile Armenian speakers in DC during the 2024 IRF week were refugee freelance journalist Siranush Sargsyan of Artsakh, an invited speaker at a plenary panel on national security and religious liberties at the IRF Summit 2024, and the current and former ombudsmen of the Republic of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh Gegham Stepanyan and Artak Beglaryan, who addressed the IRF Roundtable at Congress. Over a dozen representatives of various Armenian organizations and allies also at-



The Armenian participants at the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit

tended the weeklong events in Washington D.C. dedicated to religious freedoms.

On January 29, Maghakyan presented in his academic capacity on religious rights violations perpetrated by Azerbaijan in Artsakh in 2023, during the Congressional "The Intersectionality of International Law, Religious Freedom, and Genocide" panel as part of the IRF Summit Congressional Advocacy Day. On January 30, Archbishop Aykazian joined international attorney Karnig Kerkonian, who earlier also participated in the January 29 Congressional panel, for a fireside chat on Capitol Hill's Belmont Abbey College House to discuss the ongoing crisis in the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem. Both events were organized by the newly-formed initiative called Armenian Christians for Peace.

On January 30, Maghakyan presented a talk on holy sites, religious liberties, and satellite monitoring of religious heritage erasure crimes during the IRF Summit's Social Innovation for International Religious Freedom panel. On February 1,

Aykazian, Maghakyan and Nersessian attended the National Prayer Breakfast and related gatherings.

To conclude the IRF week in Washington D.C., on February 2 Archbishop Aykazian and Maghakyan moderated a closed discussion on support for the religious freedoms of Artsakh Armenians, with internal and external stakeholder organizations. The Western Diocese discussion was hosted by the Global Peace Foundation. The discussion included ensuring the right of safe return for Artsakh refugees now living in Armenia, and the protection of Christian Armenian holy sites, including churches and cemeteries.

"Our active participation in yet another IRF week in Washington D.C. clearly demonstrated that ongoing coalition building is critical for advancing Armenian rights," remarked Aykazian. "We are grateful to our many partners — particularly IRF Summit co-chairs Ambassador Sam Brownback and Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, as well as the Global Peace Foundation —

that gave us opportunities to spotlight the current and future status of religious freedom protections concerning all threatened communities, particularly the Armenian community, and for expressing solidarity with the forcibly displaced Armenians of Artsakh."

"We were pleased to see the presence of key Armenian stakeholders at the many IRF week events, and our committee will continue creating opportunities for such collaborative efforts in support of our homeland and our persecuted people," concluded Aykazian.

The Artsakh Heritage Committee was founded at the initiative of Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, Primate of the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, in the aftermath of the 2020 Artsakh war and its ongoing repercussions. The Committee consists of prominent scholars, experts, clergymen, and other key stakeholders dedicated to the cause of safeguarding Armenian cultural heritage under Azerbaijan's newfound control.

## Presentation of St. Nerses Shnorhali Medals

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spouse Adrineh, Stewardship Committee members, supporters, and friends.

### Ara Babayan

Ara Babayan hails from a family dedicated to the Armenian Church, education, and service to the community. His grandfather was the archpriest of the Armenian Church in Aleppo, Syria, and a founding member of Aleppo's famous old age home, which still continues to serve the elderly needing shelter, help and support.

Ara's father, Yervant Babayan, a lifelong educator, a legendary school principal of the Vahan Tekeyan School of Beirut and community leader, has inspired generations of Armenian youth. He was a founding member of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) AYA Youth Association in Aleppo. In Lebanon, he served as the chairman of the Tekeyan Cultural Association (TCA). During the Lebanese Civil War, he chaired the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party District Committee.

Ara's mother, Rosine Babayan, was an active committee member of AGBU as well as the Tekeyan Cultural Association, in Beirut. For more than 25 years she served as the recording and corresponding secretary of the Echmiadzin Ladies Society of Lebanon.

Ara Babayan, following his family's tradition of community service, started very early in life. In Beirut he joined the AGBU Scouts movement. He also joined

the Saint Kevork Armenian Church Choir. He became a founding member of the TCA youth organization. He also joined the AGBU Vahram Papazian theater group as technical support/consultant. Ara was an active contributor to the sports section of the ADL newspaper *Zartonk* daily, as well as the French magazine *L'orient-Le Jour*.

In 1980, Ara moved to New York with his family, where he joined the AGBU Ar-davazt Theater Group, first as a member and later became its chair. He also served as the chair of the Tekeyan Cultural Association chapter there.

In 1985 he moved to California with his family and continued his involvement with the community. He chaired the San Fernando Valley Tekeyan Cultural Association Chapter. He also served as secretary of the ADL District Committee, a member of the AGBU Western District Committee, chair of the committee, secretary of the ADL Committee, and a member of the AGBU District Committee.

Babayan is a founding member of the AGBU Scouts movement in Los Angeles. Currently, he is a member of the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church Zvartnotz Cultural Committee. He is also the vice chair of the Parish Counsel of St. Garabed Church of the Desert in Rancho Mirage.

Ara has always enjoyed the full and unwavering support, advice, and collaboration of his wife of 47 years, Sonia. They are blessed with two sons and five grandchildren.

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Senators Markey, Cassidy Introduce Resolution on Azerbaijan’s Human Rights Violations

SENATE, from page 1

wants supplying LNG to Europe instead of Louisiana natural gas?” said Dr. Cassidy.

“The Administration’s continuing support for the Aliyev regime, which regularly commits atrocities and human rights violations, simply isn’t in line with our values as Americans. Given Azerbaijan’s egregious military action against Artsakh on September 19, it is imperative that President Biden and Secretary Blinken reconsider our aid policies,” said Representative Schiff. “This resolution aims to gather information on human rights abuses and war crimes being committed by Azerbaijan and to halt future aid. As a country that champions human rights, we must ensure our foreign aid reflects our commitment to core values and does not contribute to further violence against the Armenian people in Artsakh. This resolution is a step towards aligning our international aid with the ethical standards and interests of the United States.”

Within 30 days of enacting the resolution, the State Department would need to produce a report that includes:

- A description of all steps the State Department has taken to promote the protection of human rights by the Azerbaijan government, including any steps taken to discourage practices that are inimical to the protection of human rights and to publicly or privately call attention or disassociate the U.S. and its security assistance to any Azerbaijani violations of human rights.
- An assessment of whether any extraordinary measures exist that necessitate the continuation of security assistance to Azerbaijan and, if such circumstances do exist, the extent to which assistance should be continued.
- An assessment on the likelihood that U.S assistance has or will be used in support of Azerbaijani aggression against Nagorno-Karabakh, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor, or in relation to the conflict with Armenia.

•A description of U.S. government efforts to adhere to section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act, which prevents U.S. assistance to any security unit against credible allegations of human rights violations.

•And a determination of whether Azerbaijani officials found responsible in human rights abuses have met the criteria for sanctions and a description of any action the U.S. government is taking to implement sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.

Cosponsors in the Senate include Senators Peter Welch (D-Vt.), Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Gary Peters (D-Mich.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), John Fetterman (D-Pa.), and Marco Rubio (R-Fla.).

The resolution is endorsed by Freedom House, Human Rights Foundation (HRF), the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), National Council of Churches (NCC), the Arms Control Association (ACA), Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), Center for International Policy (CIP), Peace Action, Common Defense, Action Corps, Foreign Policy for America (FP4A), Center for Victims of Torture (CVT), Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), National Iranian American Council (NIAC) Action, Women for Weapons Trade Transparency, Church of the Brethren Office of Peacebuilding & Policy, Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), the Hellenic American Leadership Council (HALC), In Defense of Christians (IDC), American Friends of Kurdistan (AFK), Global ARM, Armenian National Committee of America

(ANCA), and the Anglican Office for Government & International Affairs.

“This resolution marks an important step toward Congress reclaiming its long-neglected civilian protection oversight responsibilities when it comes to U.S. arms transfers and military aid. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan’s blockade of the Lachin Corridor and subsequent armed attacks brought about a humanitarian crisis for tens of thousands of civilians as well as mass displacement. Congress is right to invoke Section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act to ask serious questions about Azerbaijan’s human rights and civilian protection record and the impact of US arms transfers,” said Annie Shiel, U.S. Advocacy Director of Center for Civilians in Conflict.

“Azerbaijan’s ethnic cleansing of Artsakh’s entire indigenous Armenian population last year was a modern-day genocide the U.S. had every opportunity to prevent – but instead enabled through the reckless provision of military assistance to Baku’s authoritarian regime. The ANCA joins with coalition partners in welcoming Senator Markey’s leadership in restoring much-needed Congressional oversight of U.S. military assistance through the enforcement of Section 502B(c) – an underutilized statute that can help reassert human rights to its rightful place at the center of U.S. foreign policy,” said Aram Hamparian, Executive Director of Armenian National Committee of America.

“The Human Rights Foundation supports the U.S. Senate resolution requesting the U.S. Secretary of State to produce a comprehensive report scrutinizing the dictatorial regime of Azerbaijan’s dismal human rights record. For three decades, the Aliyev dynastic dictatorship has systematically rigged elections and committed gross human rights violations, including the persecution and wrongful imprisonment of opposition figures and journalists, as well as the torture and extrajudicial killing of Armenian POWs and civilian detainees in the context of the armed conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It’s long overdue that the United States reassess its military assistance to the Aliyev regime,” said Javier El-Hage, Chief Legal and Policy Officer of Human Rights Foundation.

“CIP applauds Senator Markey and his colleagues for seeking accountability for U.S. arms sales to Azerbaijan, whose government has an abysmal record of human right violations, including a military campaign resulting in the forced displacement of civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh. The U.S. government must take the enforcement of its own arms laws and our security partners’ obligations under international humanitarian law seriously in order to achieve President Biden’s own stated goal

of upholding human rights and a rules-based order in our foreign policy,” said Nancy Okail, President and CEO of Center for International Policy.

“Women for Weapons Trade Transparency urges Congress to invoke section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act via this resolution in light of Azerbaijan’s dismal record of human rights violations and war crimes. Congress must utilize their oversight powers to prevent U.S. assistance from being used in such violations and to ensure that U.S. weapons and funding are not hindering freedom of expression, threatening the operations of independent media, or aiding in arbitrary arrests and politically motivated prosecution,” said Lillian Mauldin, Board Member of Women for Weapons Trade Transparency.

“This resolution is an important effort to uphold U.S. laws requiring an end to military aid to abusive governments like Azerbaijan. It’s imperative that our government consistently and comprehensively enforce its own laws to all recipients of U.S. military aid,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Executive Director of Democracy for the Arab World Now.

“We thank Senators Markey and Cassidy for holding Azerbaijan accountable for committing gross human rights violations against both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. From committing genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh to attacking and illegally occupying Armenia and illegally detaining Armenian prisoners, Azerbaijan’s brutal dictatorship is not worthy of U.S. taxpayer support. The U.S. should stand on the right side of history and sanction the Aliyev regime for its unacceptable behavior,” said Timothy Jemal, President of Global ARM.

“We commend Senator Markey and welcome this bipartisan measure to hold Azerbaijan accountable for gross human rights violations against the Armenian people,” said Bryan Ardouny, Executive Director at Armenian Assembly of America.

In September 2022, Senator Markey and his colleagues led a letter calling for the U.S. to cease any security assistance to Azerbaijan until Armenia and Azerbaijan reach a permanent resolution that would ensure peace and stability in Nagorno-Karabakh. In November 2020, Senator Markey, then a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, expressed his concern about the Russian-brokered agreement signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia to end the fighting in Nagorno Karabakh and surrounding areas. In October 2020, he urged then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to seek an immediate ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan while pushing for a negotiated resolution to the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.



# SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

The Armenian Students’ Association of America Inc. is now accepting scholarship applications for the 2024-25 academic year. Applicants must have completed at least one year of college by June 2024 and be of Armenian descent. The application deadline is April 1, 2024. We awarded over \$155,000 in scholarships to 32 deserving students last year. Please visit [www.asainc.org](http://www.asainc.org) for applications and further information.

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## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Successful San Francisco Gala Benefits Expansion of AUA Campus

SAN FRANCISCO — On January 27, the San Francisco Bay Area community gathered at the Vision for the Future: Advancing Higher Education in Armenia gala in support of the American University of Armenia (AUA). The event took place at the Marines' Memorial Club & Hotel in Downtown San Francisco. Through ticket sales, sponsorships, and proceeds from the silent auction, the event raised close to \$1.5 million to be directed toward the Build a Better Future With AUA capital campaign, benefiting the university's ambitious expansion plans.

Hosted by Ella Sogomonian, news anchor and reporter at KRON, the program featured musical performances by Vardan Ovespian and Astghik Martirosyan and an impressive lineup of notable guest speakers, including Dr. Bruce Boghosian, AUA president; Dr. Yervant Zorian, chief architect and fellow at Synopsys, president of Synopsys Armenia; Rev Lebareadian, vice president of Omniverse & Simulation Technology at NVIDIA; and Michael A. Goorjian, actor, writer, and director of *Amerikatsi*, Armenia's entry for the 96th Academy Awards.

The evening's program opened with the national anthems of the United States and Armenia, as well as a prayer by Father Krikor Zakaryan. In their opening remarks, the event committee co-chairs, Valina Agbabian and Laura Dirtadian, recognized the three AUA co-founders: Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian, the late Dr. Mihran Agbabian, and the late Dr. Stepan Karamardian, before a crowd that included many of their peers from the University of California



AUA President Dr. Bruce Boghosian on stage at the AUA Gala

al efforts in helping open NVIDIA's office in Armenia. He also mentioned a recent update on the country's approved budget to build a supercomputer, following a meeting between Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and NVIDIA Co-Founder and CEO Jensen Huang. Touting the importance of artificial intelligence, especially for a small country like Armenia, Lebareadian reiterated the need to support this growth through institutions like AUA: "Education is the engine of growth and prosperity, and this is a great opportunity for Armenia to compete on the world stage, despite its size."

As the final featured guest, Goorjian spoke about his experiences filming "*Amerikatsi*" in Armenia and the connection he made with his homeland through the process. He also touched on the

idea of hope that was conveyed in his film and pressed the importance of collectively looking to the future and how institutions like AUA play a pivotal role in that.

Several alumni were also recognized, including Susanna Avagyan (BSDS '22), who is continuing her education at Stanford University, and Maykl Hovhannesian (BAEC '18, LL.M. '20), who committed to becoming AUA's newest ChangeMaker that evening.

Presenting the capital campaign efforts, Vice President of Development Gaiane Khachatryan thanked the guests for attending the event, as well as the event sponsors, including benefactors Hagop and Iroula Manuelian as the highest level sponsors, for their continued support of AUA. She also announced the commitment of a new major gift by AUA benefactors Susan Jerian and David Essayan, who pledged a \$1,000,000 transformational gift to name a one-of-a-kind auditorium planned to be built in the new AUA building complex. "The expansion of AUA is not merely the addition of new buildings. It's a commit-



Michael A. Goorjian, director, writer, actor of "*Amerikatsi*"

community. Der Kiureghian, the only surviving co-founder, took the stage to be recognized with a token of appreciation.

Boghosian then took the stage to provide an overview of the university, as well as the reasons for the institution's need to expand: "We now find ourselves refusing students with high SAT scores, and this is a problem because we really don't want to exclude such talented and promising students. If students at this level cannot secure a position at AUA, they often emigrate, and we would like to do our part to prevent that. So it is time for us to expand once again."

Following Boghosian, Zorian reflected on the success of AUA since its inception: "What AUA has given us so far is extremely impressive. The students graduate, they join the workforce, and work to give back to Armenia, in both the private and public sectors." He continued to commend the Armenian Diaspora for its efforts, emphasizing the importance of investing in education in Armenia.

Lebareadian then took the audience on a journey, from his upbringing to his person-



AUA Development team (left to right) Lucas Der Mugrdechian, Marianna Achemian, Gaiane Khachatryan, Siranush Khandanyan, Edlin Hovsepian

ment to take AUA and the nation in the direction of progress and innovation, all of which translates to Armenia's advancement," remarked Khachatryan.

The university's expansion plans include the construction of three new buildings: science and engineering (Akian family Building), humanities and social sciences (Edward & Pamela Avedisian Building), and the arts (Paruyr Sevak Building), all of which will be connected by an atrium. Along with the enhancement of the Univer-

sity's existing curriculum and development of new academic programs, the expanded campus footprint will help accommodate rising enrollment trends, which will see AUA's enrollment almost double in the next five years.

As a leading institution of higher education in Armenia, AUA is driving forward advancement across many disciplines, all of which will boost the country's national growth. To learn more about the capital campaign, visit <https://babf.aua.am>.



Event Co-Chairs Laura Dirtadian and Valina Agbabian recognizing AUA Co-Founder Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian for his service to AUA



COMMUNITY NEWS

# The Immigration History of Damascus Armenians

By **Kevorg Keushkerian**  
Special to the *Mirror-Spectator*

ALTADENA, Calif. — An informative lecture on the immigration history of the Damascus Armenians and the Armenian refugee camps there was organized by Tekeyan Cultural Association (TCA) Metro Los Angeles chapter on Sunday, January 28, at the TCA Beshgeturian Center. The keynote speaker was Sevan Boghos-Deirbadrossian, vice chair of the TCA Metro Los Angeles chapter.

Master of Ceremonies Hratch Sepetjian first invited University of California, Los Angeles student Alik Artinian to recite three prose-poems written in Armenian by Boghos-Deirbadrossian which are dedicated to her birthplace of Damascus. They were entitled “Observation,” “Return” and “The Travelers Have Returned.”

Sepetjian then introduced Boghos-Deirbadrossian. She was born in Damascus, Syria, graduated from the Holy Transla-

tors School there, and then studied the English language at the University of Damascus. She taught English language for eight years at her alma mater, Holy Translators School.

Sevan is married to Hovig Deirbadrossian and has two children, Bedros and Nanor. The Deirbadrossian family immigrated to the United States and settled in Los Angeles. Through correspondence, Sevan earned a master’s degree in Armenian Language from the Institute of Foreign Languages in France. She has been teaching Armenian Language and Literature for 20 years at the AGBU Manougian-Demirdjian secondary school in Canoga Park.

Boghos-Deirbadrossian used slides of maps and pictures throughout her presentation. She said that practically since the beginning of time, Damascus has been a gateway for pilgrims heading to the Holy City of Jerusalem. She then divided the immigration history of Damascus Arme-

nians into two phases: phase I, prior Christ (the era of Dikran the Great) to the 19th century, and phase II, from the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century.

Concerning the first phase, Boghos-Deirbadrossian enumerated the different foreign invasions of the Armenian homeland which caused the immigration of Armenians to Damascus, among other cities. These included the Arabian invasion (700-868), the Persian invasion and the Byzantine invasion.

Phase II comprises the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide in 1915 by the Turks. One million and a half Armenians were systematically annihilated and the rest were driven to the neighboring hospitable Arab countries, including the cities of Aleppo and Damascus in Syria.

Boghos-Deirbadrossian spent some time describing the Armenian refugee camps in Damascus from the 1920s. These camps provided shelter to the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and helped them

develop the future Armenian communities there.

The al-Kadam Camp had a short life, as it was outside the Damascus city walls. A group of Armenian refugees found shelter in an old, abandoned Ottoman Army barracks near the al-Kadam train station.



Keynote speaker Sevan Boghos-Deirbadrossian (photo Karine Armen)

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Saturday 30.03

Sunday 31.03

Monday 01.04

Tuesday 02.04

Wednesday 03.04

Rep Meet, assist at Cairo international airport & transfer to Sonesta Hotel. Gogonian club at night

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

After breakfast, visit of Egyptian Museum in El Tahrir & Abdin Palace - Lunch

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)

Abu Simbel visit, check in Nile cruise M/S Beau Soleil, Aswan market visit

Aswan visits: Philae temple & the unfinished Obelisk, lunch on boat, Kom Ombo city & sail to Edfu City

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

Visit west bank in Luxor, Valley of the Kings & Hatshepsut temple and two statues of Memnon, lunch and transfer from Luxor to Hurghada Prima Life Makadi resort

Free days to enjoy the beach, the red sea & the resort.  
All-inclusive basis (Alcoholic beverages excluded)

Breakfast, check-out and Hurghada flight to Cairo, bus trip to Alexandria, check-in Romance Alexandria hotel, bus tour & free time

Alexandria tour: Qaitbay citadel, Alexandria library, Pompey's pillar, Kom el Shoqafaw catacombs, Montazah Palace - lunch at Yacht club (Not included)  
(Optional visit: Al Alamein. Early departure, visits and joining group upon return – will miss some of Alexandria visits)

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

Full day visits: Civilization Egyptian museum & Old Cairo and lunch at Andrea restaurant. Armenian club at night

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Kayane (514) 983-4759 [kayaneb@gmail.com](mailto:kayaneb@gmail.com)

Nora (438) 889-4743 [nora.vacoubian@yahoo.ca](mailto:nora.vacoubian@yahoo.ca)

Camp Dikran was also called Camp “Bab Sharki,” or the Eastern Gate, and it was located south of the city of Damascus. The refugees here initially erected tents and other temporary structures made of tin. But soon, they began building more permanent structures, with financial loans from the Nansen Office.

The Khcheri Camp was named after a refugee from Cilicia called Khcher Geondjian, who rented land from an Arab, built huts on that land and rented them out to Armenians, making a small profit. The local Arab population simply called it the “Armenian Camp.”

Boghos-Deirbadrossian presented many statistics, including the fact that the Armenian Apostolic St. Sarkis Church was built during 1438-1445; the Armenian Catholic Church was built in 1826; the Armenian Evangelical Church was built in 1922. She noted that in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, there were about 100,000 Armenians in Syria and another 80,000 Armenians in Lebanon, while currently, there are about 5,000 Armenians left Damascus.

At the end of the presentation, master of ceremonies Sepetjian read a letter of blessings and appreciation sent by Bishop Armash Nalbandian, the current Primate of the Diocese of Damascus.

Bishop Nalbandian first congratulated the TCA Metro Los Angeles chapter for organizing such an important research-based lecture and then extended his appreciation to native Damascene Boghos-Deirbadrossian for undertaking such a difficult task, which has not been previously dealt with in detail and is essential for the understanding of the development of the Armenian community in Damascus. Such research, he added, needs to be conducted for every Armenian community in the Middle East.

Notable among the attendees of the lecture was Diana Alexanian of Michigan, chair of the TCA Detroit chapter.

Upon the conclusion of the lecture, Sepetjian invited the guests to a delicious dinner buffet reception.





# Arts & Culture

## Short Documentary 'The Last Repair Shop' Nominated for Academy Award

LOS ANGELES (Combined Sources) — The small but mighty group of people who painstakingly repair musical instruments for tens of thousands of public school students in Los Angeles aren't used to being in the spotlight.

But a new documentary is bringing their stories — and those of the kids whose lives they have changed for the better — to the red carpet.

In their Oscar-nominated film "The Last Repair Shop," Halifax, Canada native Ben Proudfoot and L.A.'s Kris Bowers tell the story of the L.A. Unified School District's Musical Instrument Repair Shop, where 11 technicians service about 6,000 instruments each year for more than 1,300 schools across the city.

It's one of the last public school districts in the U.S. to service musical instruments free of charge.

"I was drawn in by this sort of North Pole of musical instrument repair, and was surprised and proud to learn that it was [one of] the last in the country," Proudfoot said.

"The Last Repair Shop," which is streaming for free on YouTube, is nominated for the 2024 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short. Proudfoot won the category in 2022 for Queen of Basketball.

What to do with a broken violin peg, or a leaky euphonium? For students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, such a predicament doesn't mean catastrophe. They have at their disposal a repair shop where



Kris Bowers and Ben Proudfoot, the producers of "The Last Repair

a quartet of dedicated individuals attend to damaged instruments, restoring them to exemplary condition.

Bowers is a pianist and composer who has scored numerous films and television series, including "Green Book," "King Richard," "Bridgerton," "The Color Purple" and Ava DuVernay's "Origin." He also happens to be a graduate of the LAUSD and benefitted from the district's music program.

"For me as a pianist, my only option to play an instrument in the school was the instrument that they had there," he told Deadline at the Telluride Music Company in November. "If that instrument wasn't kept in good shape, I wonder if I would've developed as personal of a connection to it when I was there every day. But then you look at how many kids can't afford to have instruments — see DOCUMENTARY, page 14



The reading advertised in the window at Gabo Kitchen (photo Lynn Derderian)

## Balakian's Diyarbakir Visit Seems Like a Dream Now

By Aram Arkun  
Mirror-Spectator Staff

WATERTOWN — Peter Balakian, Pulitzer Prize winning author of eight books of poetry and four of prose, continues to explore the Armenian past and future. In May 2015 he went to Diyarbakir, Turkey, the Dikranagerd of the Armenians, to give a reading from his works. This was the city where his grandmother was born, and where her family was massacred in August 1915. This was an unusual visit; it fell in a small window of time where it was possible for an Armenian to speak in a public event there. The two sponsors of the event today remain either in prison (Osman Kavala) or exile (Kawa Nemir).

Balakian looked back at the significance of this event and his visit in an article published last fall, 2023, in *AGNI* magazine (no. 98), simply titled "A Poetry Reading in Diyarbakir." Several paragraphs from the article are excerpted below, followed by some further thoughts by Balakian in response to questions from the *Mirror-Spectator*.

"I was too caught up in the euphoria of the moment to imagine that the two men who hosted my poetry reading in Diyarbakir would be in exile or prison two years later, and that the entire old quarter of the city would be destroyed only months after our departure. May 2015 was a spirited time to be in Diyarbakir, the Kurdish center of Turkey in the southeast. It was a moment of hope for democracy in Turkey and for Kurdish rights after decades of violence and suppression. My visit to Diyarbakir to give a reading with the Kurdish poet Kawa Nemir in the centennial year of the Armenian Genocide meant that I would read and discuss the story of my family's mass murder and expulsion from their historic homeland. A few years earlier such an idea would have been absurd, especially given the laws and taboos in Turkey. And the 2007 assassination of Armenian human rights activist and journalist Hrant Dink midday in downtown Istanbul still hovered. But that spring, traveling with my family on a pilgrimage to historic Armenia in eastern Turkey, I felt hopeful about the new winds of democracy.

"There was a cultural revolution happening here — in a country where in the first years of the twenty-first century it was still illegal to use the word Kurdish in public; where Kurdish dress, schools, and radio had been outlawed. There were fifteen million Kurds, a quarter of the population of Turkey, the largest ethnic minority in the country and the largest stateless ethnic group in the world, and they were forced by law to call themselves "mountain Turks." As a result of decades of Kurdish civil rights struggle, some liberalizing forces in Turkey, and pressure from Europe in the wake of Turkey's then-hoped-for admission to the EU, President Recep Erdogan and his government assented to legalizing the Kurdish language, radio, and traditional dress. But amid this new energy in the streets — the Turkish state was ubiquitous. Army jeeps, soldiers with automatic rifles, police on street corners. And the green metal fence of the military base just a few yards from our hotel driveway seemed to stretch for miles. In this tinderbox, the Kurds that we met greeted us with a mix of delight and desperation, as if to say, Glad to see you — and don't leave us here alone. see DIYARBAKIR, page 17

## Vladimir Agopov

A Finnish Composer  
With Armenian Roots



By Artsvi Bakhchinyan  
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN/HELSINKI — Finnish composer Vladimir Agopov (born 1953, Lugansk, Ukraine) graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1977 after studying with major Soviet composers Aram Khachaturian (composition) and Edison Denisov (instrumentation). In 1978 he emigrated to Finland. From 1982 to 2021, he taught at the Sibelius Academy of Music. Since 1982, he has been a member of the Finnish Composers' Union. In 1985, Agopov's piece for solo violin, *Ergo*, won second prize at the Composers' Competition of the Sibelius International Violin Competition. In 2013, Agopov's piece, *Solveig's Dreams for Harp Solo*, won first prize at the Grieg Composition Competition (Norway), while his vocal cycle set to Blake's poems won first prize at the "Lied – 2017" Composition Competition. His work, *Prayer*, for male choir was performed at the "World Music Days 2019" festival. Among Agopov's most important works are Music for chamber orchestra (prize at the Finnish National Composers' Competition, 1982), Concerto for Cello and Orchestra *Tres viae* (1984/1987), *Settembre* for large orchestra (2004), Concerto for Orchestra *Homage to Master* (2013), Concerto for Organ and Orchestra *Notre Dame* (2022), *Blackbird Variations* for soprano and orchestra (2018), two string quartets (2012), etc., as well as a number of arrangements for various ensembles.

Agopov's works have been performed at various festivals in Finland (Kuhmo, Naantali, Korsholm) and other countries, such as the International Festival of Arts, New York, the 13th World Harp Congress in Hong Kong, "Moscow Autumn 2019" and others.

Dear Mr. Agopov, I first learnt about you when I was working on an article about Armenian-Finnish historical and cultural relations. You are now considered a Finnish composer, as you have lived and see AGOPOV, page 14





## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# Vladimir Agopov: A Finnish Composer with Armenian Roots

**AGOPOV, from page 13**  
**created in Finland for most of your life. How would you characterize the state of symphonic music in Sibelius' homeland?**

We can say that today's symphonic music scene in Finland is at a very high level. Composers such as Magnus Lindberg and especially the recently deceased female composer Kaija Saariaho are major figures in contemporary music. In addition to them, Finland has a large group of composers whose works are performed by the world's leading orchestras. In addition, there is a strong Finnish conducting school, whose representatives promote the work of Finnish composers all over the world.

**Finland always had a small number of Armenians. Before you, composer Nathan Knyazev (Amirkhanyan) lived and worked in that country for a short time. How did you end up in Finland?**

Nathan Knyazev is not mentioned in any Finnish sources known to me and I have not met any evidence of his life in Finland. As to me, I moved to Finland for family reasons, as my wife is Finnish.

**What are your memories of Aram Khachaturian?**

Studying for five years in Aram Khachaturian's class was a great happiness. I still remember many of his remarks and comments on my compositions or those of his other students. Once, after listening to my work, he said: "Volodya, it is well written, but it does not scrape my heart." Aram Ilyich wanted his every pupil to have his own character, his own style, and that the music in general not to leave listeners indifferent. That is why his pupils differ so much from one another. Enough to recall the names of Mikael Tariverdiev, Alexei Rybnikov or Kirill Volkov.



"Portrait of Vladimir Agopov" by Aramais Avetisyan (Finland, 1936-2009).

**It is written about you that in your creative work you combine layers of different musical cultures. Does it also include Armenian music?**

It seems to me that very different layers can be combined in the works of modern composers, as there is a huge amount of music in the world. The work of Alfred Schnittke is a wonderful example of combining different layers. I myself rarely think about musical layers, rather I try to give each composition an individual appearance. But sometimes some melodies or rhythms in the depths of memory can influence the creative process. For example, in one of my pieces for solo harp, the rhythms of an Armenian dance I heard in my childhood somehow spontaneously appeared.

**I believe your ancestors were Hagopians. Where were they from?**

Yes, that is right. My grandfather was Hagopian. When he moved to Russia, he

became Agopov, and when my father was issued a passport, they wrote down Agopov in Russian, by analogy with the surname Agapov. On my mother's side I have relatives from Artvin, on my father's side I do not know exactly.

**Were there Armenian traditions in the family, such as language, music, church, cuisine?**

Unfortunately, I do not speak the language. My mother spoke it well, but my father did not speak it, because after his father's deprivation, he had to hide who he was. Therefore, our family spoke Russian. There was no Armenian church in Lugansk, so I was baptized in the local Orthodox church. But music was different. I remember from my childhood, when relatives gathered, Armenian music was played, though from records. But I have known Armenian cuisine since childhood, my mother and grandmother often cooked Armenian dishes.

**Do you maintain contacts with the Armenians of Finland?**

Yes, but not as closely as before. There are big disagreements on political issues in the Diaspora, so we rarely get together.

**Have you been to Armenia and do you have connections with Armenian composers?**

Unfortunately, I have never been to Armenia, but it is in my plans to visit. I have no ties with Armenian composers, but I do follow the work of some of them. One of the most interesting composers with Armenian roots for me is Yuri Kasparov from Moscow. He also graduated from the Moscow Conservatoire, but later than me, so we did not meet in Moscow.

**Friedrich Nietzsche said: "Without music, life would be a mistake." Do you agree?**

It is absolutely true. Much has been written about music. That architecture is frozen music, or that where words end, music begins, etc. But more than that, for me music reflects the times in which the composers who compose it live. As I said in another interview, the characteristic features of contemporary music became apparent at the World Music Days in Tallinn. I attended many concerts there, and the surprising thing was that, with few exceptions, composers from all over the world presented very aggressive, even angry music. I do not know if it was a reflection of the world around us or something else. It was as if there was nothing bright left in our world. But I myself think in terms of goodness.

**Thank you for your answers, Mr. Agopov! I wish you good health and that one day your works will also be heard in Armenia!**

## Short Documentary 'The Last Repair Shop' Nominated for Academy Award

**DOCUMENTARY, from page 13**  
 ments at home, and they really rely on these school instruments to be able to play and to be in working order."

Proudfoot, an Oscar winner himself for "The Queen of Basketball," is a musician as well, although he would demur.

"I was just curious about this shop," Proudfoot explained about the origins of the project. "I've made a lot of craftspeople films, and so I had started going down there and poking around and shooting."

He discovered Dana Atkinson repairing stringed instruments, Duane Michaels looking after woodwinds, Paty Moreno on the brass beat, and overseeing it all, Steve Bagmanyan, who's also a piano tuner. The four shared remarkable personal journeys that had led them on circuitous paths to the shop. Moreno emigrated from Mexico, struggling as a single mom just to feed her two kids.

"The first person I talked to was Paty, and I was just rolling in a bath of tears at the end of that discussion," Proudfoot recalled. "And then it was Duane who opened for Elvis's biggest night [in 1975, playing with his band Bodie Mountain Express]. And then Dana, who took you to the core of what it means to think you're broken and then to realize that you're not. And then Steve... you kind of just assume he's like the bean counter, overseer of the whole thing. And then you realize he's kind of got the best story of all and is a piano tuner himself."

Bagmanyan, part of the Armenian mi-



Steve Bagmanyan

nority of Azerbaijan, had to flee his country in the midst of persecution of his ethnic group. He came to America speaking virtually no English.

For a filmmaker, the odds aren't good that every character you interview for a documentary will turn out to be incredibly compelling. "We kept finding four leaf clovers, basically," Proudfoot said. "And I remember saying to Jeremy [Lambert, producer], I've never seen a concentration of amazing stories matched with visuals that I've seen in this little shop."

Proudfoot's original vision was to focus on the instrument repairers alone. But Bowers had another idea.

"He was like, 'You need the kids,'" Proudfoot remembers. And I was like, '...I'm interested in the craftspeople, and wouldn't it be more of a challenge to do it without the kids? Everybody loves the kids.' And he is like, 'No, you need the kids. And it needs to be about that relation-

ship between them and the instrument.'"

So it became that some endearing young people bring musical counterpoint to The Last Repair Shop.

"If I didn't have my violin from school, I would probably – I don't know what I would do," Porche Brinker says at the top of the film, adding with a grin, "Don't even jinx it for me."

Ismerai Calcano shows off her instrument: "My school gave me my saxophone... This is a beauty," she says proudly. "When I'm feeling tense or I'm feeling sad or angry, the saxophone calms me down."

Amanda Nova, a young pianist, also speaks of mental health challenges common to people her age. "I guess I'm, like, scared of failure. I'm scared I won't find a purpose in life. But once I go on stage, all that tension goes away."

Bowers said he most identified with Nova. "Just the level of pressure she felt at that age, I really remember having this high bar of excellence being set on me from mostly my parents, but just this idea of you need to be incredible or else, and it just creates so much anxiety and stress and all that," he said. "And to see her not only struggle with that or feel that or move through that, but also how she obviously channels a lot of her energy into the piano. That's one of my favorite moments when she's really meek and talking about what it's like to play music, and then she just lays out this huge sound from the instrument."

Bowers said he didn't recall damaging a piano during his time as an LAUSD student

such that it required attention from the repair shop quartet.

"I don't think so," he said, adding, "I'm going to plead the fifth."

The important point is that if there had been a mishap, Steve Bagmanyan and his colleagues would have stepped in to make it all right. They fix those broken violin pegs, leaky euphoniums, or G-sharp keys that come loose from saxophones, whatever comes their way (Moreno, as the brass expert, keeps a jar full of foreign objects that have made their way down the tubing – marbles, batteries, candies, even a troll doll).

Proudfoot describes the LAUSD program as "the pride of the nation" and the repair team as deserving of public recognition.

"For me, that's why you make a documentary. It's a spotlight," he said. "Those repair people, they're invisible. They're literally in this nondescript building under the freeway downtown in this fenced-in sort of industrial area where LAUSD stuff happens... Taylor Swift — that's a lot of people's music hero. These are our music heroes. These people who, day in and day out without credit, without thank you, without much money, go in and stitch back together not just the instruments, but the confidence and the hearts of every school child in our city. I think that deserves to be on the front page. I think they deserve a standing ovation."

(Material from Deadline and CBC Radio were used to put together this story.)





## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# Recipe Corner



by Christine Vartanian

(PHOTO COURTESY [HTTPS://SILKROADRECIPES.COM/BARAZEK-SESAME-SEED-COOKIES/](https://silkroadrecipes.com/barazek-sesame-seed-cookies/))



## Sesame-Pistachio Cookies (Barazek)

Barazek or barazeq (in Arabic barāzeq) is a classic Syrian-Palestinian cookie whose main ingredient is sesame (also called simsim and baksum in Arabic) and often also contains pieces of pistachio. Barazek is a typically Syrian culinary specialty, rooted in Damascus, the country's capital. These cookies are popular in Homs or in Aleppo, a city located in the north-west of Syria and famous for its production of tasty pistachios. Although the barazek is originally a Syrian pastry, the recipe has spread widely throughout the Middle East, including Lebanon and Jordan. It is now common to find the famous sesame biscuits throughout the Levantine area (Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Syria) and beyond. It is one of the more traditional Palestinian desserts and it is easy to find stalls selling barazek on the streets of Jerusalem. Make it as big or as small as you want, crunchy or chewy depends on the thickness you form them, so these cookies can easily be tailored to your liking. For many Syrians, barazek is a sweet treat synonymous with exchange, conviviality and community spirit. They can be enjoyed throughout the year, accompanied by a cup of mint tea, black tea (preferably full-bodied) or a delicious Armenian coffee.

Portions of this story was originally published in the *Los Angeles Times* by Charles Perry on April 18, 2007:

LOS ANGELES — The other day, a co-worker brought in some mysterious cookies from an Armenian bakery, a little sheepish about having polished off about a third of them on the way. They were tan domes with a tight spiral pattern on top, making them look a bit like snail shells lying on their sides. The pastry had a distinctive taste, more wholesome than cookie dough, followed by a little blast of richness from that spiral, which turned out to be a filling of sesame tahini. It tasted like peanut butter without peanut butter's funky edge.

In other words, these were cookies we could eat a lot of, and we proceeded to do so. But not before I saved one or two to explore their mystery. When you cut one in half, the interior turned out to be curving lines of pastry alternating with darker caverns of sesame filling, vaguely like the pattern of layers in a halved onion. Whatever it was, the pastry was definitely not cookie dough. I had to know what was going on here.

This plunged me into the vortex of the 70-odd Armenian bakeries in the L.A. area. Some were bread bakeries, but a lot were filled with case after case of French patisserie and syrup-soaked baklavas — dangerous places to wander around in. Only a couple of pastry shops made these tahini cookies. But how did this innocent cookie end up in these glittering palaces of seduction anyway?

It turned out that this “cookie” is considered to be a bread — not a pastry — because it's made with yeast-risen dough. It happens to be a clever variation on Middle Eastern tahini bread (in Arabic, khubz tahini; in Armenian, tahinov hats), which is usually made as a pita-size flatbread. Some Armenian bakeries, such as Taron in east Hollywood, make this big, flat variety, but Maral's Pastry in Van

Nuys and Sarkis Pastry in Glendale make the dome-cookie version.

### Elusive Recipe

To us, it was no contest: The dome shape is better. It's a more convenient size and easier to eat, and the balance of flavors is better. But we wanted to know: How do you make these irresistible treats? The only recipe I could find was in an obscure cookbook published 25 years ago in Saudi Arabia, and it didn't give the exact result we wanted, even after tweaking it nine ways. So I asked some Armenian bakers, but they were reluctant to give out their recipes. One told me, “You ask about my business, you ask too many questions, my friend.”

Uh-oh. I should have foreseen this — it's a Middle Eastern tradition, as I already knew: When I traveled around Syria in 1980, I naively asked bakers in every town from Damascus to Aleppo about the local pastries, and their answers were always incomprehensible. Finally, my driver took me aside and darkly told me, “Not even to their own sons, not till they're on their death beds, will they tell their secrets.”

Well, I understood. It's a bakery-eat-bakery world out there, and a pastry chef doesn't want to give up his edge. Still, that bread-cookie remained outside our grasp. Finally, Hovsep Sarkozian of Maral's took pity on us and spelled it out. The secret seemed to be (as we should have known): This is a cross between a bread and a cookie, so it needs sugar and oil in the dough. Once it rises, you shape it and bake it right away without the sort of rests and additional rises that bread dough usually gets. To tell the truth, even the versions that hadn't been exactly what we wanted — the ones with loose spirals or dough that was too puffy or the ones that didn't brown up enough — were quite good.

So finally the quest was over. Not that I'm going to stop going to Armenian bakeries, mind you. Man does not live by tahini bread alone.

### INGREDIENTS:

7 tablespoons butter, melted, cooled  
6 tablespoons plus 1 1/4 teaspoons sugar  
1 egg  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
1 teaspoon cider vinegar  
1 3/4 cup flour  
1/2 teaspoon baking powder  
1/8 teaspoon salt  
1 egg white  
3/4 teaspoon white vinegar  
1/2 cup pistachios, chopped  
1/2 cup untoasted sesame seeds

### PREPARATION:

In a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment or with a hand-held mixer, cream butter and sugar together until light and fluffy. Add the egg, vanilla and cider vinegar. Stir in the flour, baking powder and salt. Mix until combined. Turn out the dough, form into a ball, wrap with plastic film; refrigerate 30 minutes.

In a bowl, mix the egg white, white vinegar and 1 tablespoon water and set aside. Place the chopped pistachios and sesame seeds in a wide dish or pie pan and set aside.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Divide dough in half; keep half reserved until ready to use. Measure 1 rounded teaspoon of dough, roll into a ball and flatten to form it into a 2-inch (by 1/8 -inch) circle. Lightly press one side of each cookie into the pistachios; turn the cookie over, brush the other side with egg wash and dip it in the sesame seeds to coat the other side. Place the cookies on a cookie sheet and bake pistachio-side down until the sesame seeds are lightly toasted and golden, 15 to 18 minutes.

From “Seductive Flavors of the Levant” by Nada Saleh. At Armenian bakeries you also find these crisp wafers exploding with sesame flavor.

For this story, go to: <https://www.latimes.com/recipe/sesame-pistachio-cookies-barazek>

Makes about 4 1/2 dozen cookies.

Also:

<https://silkroadrecipes.com/barazek-sesame-seed-cookies/>  
<https://sourandsweets.com/baksam-middle-eastern-sesame-seed-cookies/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/armenianandmiddleeasterncooking/posts/-barazek-cookies-middleeastern-sesameseeds-pistachiosby-the-art-of-armenian-midd/10155493380415794/>

<https://streamofflavors.com/recipes/barazek-cookies/>  
<https://amiraspantry.com/syrian-barazek-cookies/>  
<https://ilovearabicfood.com/recipes/barazek-sesame-pistachio-cookies/>  
<https://www.fufuskitchen.com/barazek-sesame-seed-cookies/>  
<https://foodgps.com/marals-pastry-van-nuys/>  
<https://la.eater.com/2017/3/10/14787576/best-house-made-baklava-los-angeles>  
<https://www.discoverlosangeles.com/eat-drink/the-best-cookies-in-los-angeles>  
<https://passionfruitgarden.com/2013/08/11/barazek-sesame-seed-cookies-or-in-need-of-a-lebanese-aunt/>  
<https://www.munatycooking.com/barazek/>

Sesame seed is one of the oldest oilseed crops known, domesticated well over 3,000 years ago. Sesamum has many other species, most being wild and native to sub-Saharan Africa. Bob's Red Mill adds: The most apparent difference between these two seeds is their color. Black sesame seeds have a deeper color and almost always have the hull on. White sesame seeds have their hulls removed and reveal the inner white part of the seed. Removing the hull not only changes the color it also changes the nutritional value.



# Books

## International Armenian Literary Alliances Announces Publication Of New Works of Prose, Poetry

### *The Palace of Forty Pillars* by Armen Davoudian

Armen Davoudian's *The Palace of Forty Pillars* is a Publishers Weekly and The Rumpus Most Anticipated Poetry Book of 2024.

Wry, tender, and formally innovative, Armen Davoudian's 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. It is a story darkened by the long shadow of global tragedies—the Armenian genocide, war in the Middle East, the specter of homophobia. With masterful attention to rhyme and meter, these poems also carefully witness the most intimate encounters: the awkward distance between mother and son getting ready in the morning, the delicate balance of power between lovers, a tense exchange with the morality police in Iran.

In Isfahan, Iran, the eponymous palace has only twenty pillars but, reflected in its courtyard pool, they become forty. This is the gamble of Davoudian's magical, ruminative poems: to recreate, in art's reflection, a home for the speaker, who is unable to return to it in life.



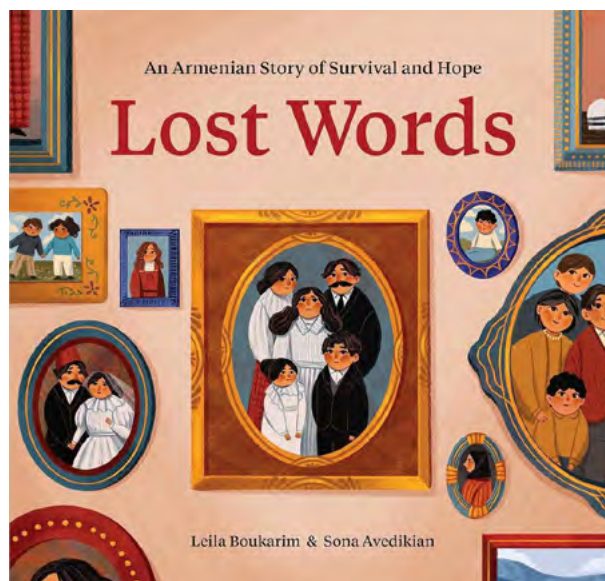
Armen Davoudian has an MFA from Johns Hopkins University and is a PhD candidate in English at Stanford University. His poems and translations from Persian appear in *Poetry* magazine, the *Hopkins Review*, the *Yale Review*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Swan Song*, won the Frost Place Competition. Armen grew up in Isfahan, Iran, and lives in Berkeley, Calif.

To pre-order *The Palace of Forty Pillars* (to be published on March 19, 2024) from the IALA Bookstore.

### *Lost Words* by Leila Boukarim and Sona Avedikian

Based on a true family story, this inspiring picture book about the Armenian Genocide shares an often-overlooked history and honors the resilience of the Armenian people.

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, *Lost Words: An Armenian Story of Survival and Hope* 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.



Leila Boukarim writes stories for children that inspire empathy and encourage meaningful discussions. She enjoys reading (multiple books at a time), embroidering, nature walking, and spending time with people, listening to their stories and sharing her own. Boukarim lives in Berlin, Germany.

Sona Avedikian is an Armenian illustrator born in Beirut, Lebanon, and currently based in Detroit, Michigan. She loves creating vibrant work and often takes inspiration from Armenian art and architecture.

You can now pre-order *Lost Words* (to be published on March 26, 2024) from the IALA Bookstore

### *In Everything I See Your Hand* by Naira Kuzmich

What's the difference between leaving the motherland and leaving the literal mother? When does the journey toward self-possession become something closer to self-exile? Living daily in the tension between assimilation, disillusionment, and desire, the Armenian-American protagonists of *In Everything I See Your Hand* struggle with



the belief that their futures are already decided, futures that can only be escaped through death or departure — if they can be escaped at all.

In these ten brilliant stories, Kuzmich spins variations of immigrant life in the Little Armenia neighborhood of Los Angeles. Kuzmich finished this collection before her death at age twenty-nine. Melding empathy, savvy, and candor through ardently wrought language, these stories are gifts that seduce, devastate, and shine.

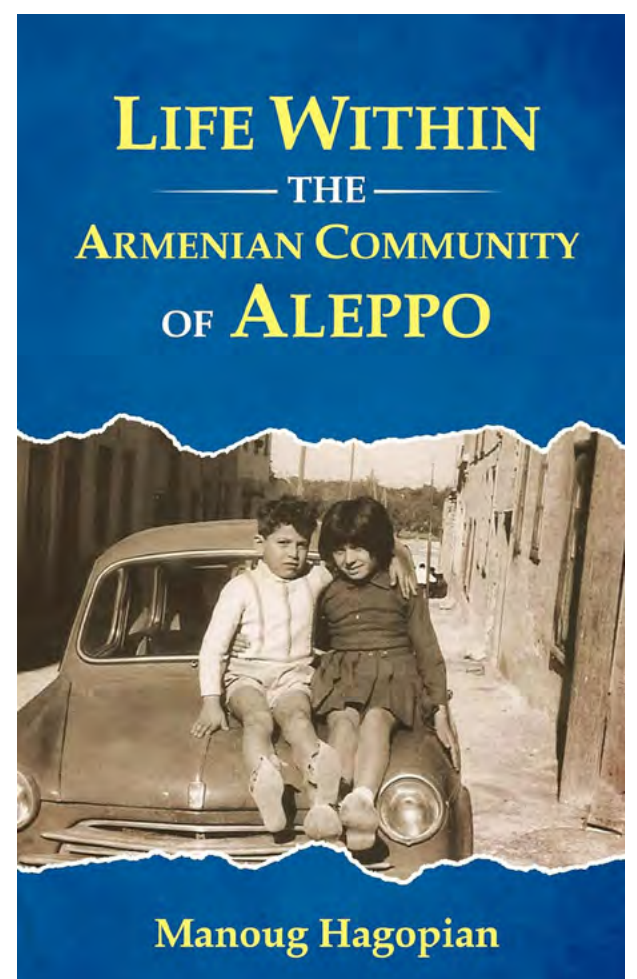
Kuzmich was born in Armenia and raised in the Los Angeles enclave of Little Armenia. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *West Branch*, *Blackbird*, *Ecotone*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2015*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and elsewhere. She passed away in 2017 from lung cancer.

You can now purchase *In Everything I See Your Hand* from the IALA Bookstore powered by Bookshop.

### *Life in the Armenian Community of Aleppo* by Manoug Hagopian

Manoug Hagopian's memoir in stories, *Life in the Armenian Community of Aleppo*, describes Armenians' joys, griefs, and daily efforts to survive after they fled the 1915 massacres in a land that accepted them with open arms.

The writer shows that Armenians who arrived in Aleppo at the turn of the twentieth century did not stay idle as refugees, but continued their lives as they did in the Armenian-populated cities, towns, and villages they were



born in. Their offspring then carried the torch of their parents and built their lives in Aleppo and other countries that they migrated to. Today, hardly any country in the world does not bear the mark of Armenians.



Hagopian was born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1954. At sixteen, he moved to Beirut, Lebanon, and then to the United Arab Emirates, where he worked at the offices of various international companies. Hagopian and his late Cypriot wife, Rita, had two sons. Today, he lives with his sons in Nicosia, Cyprus.

The writer worked as a translator for about 25 years at various companies in the UAE and Cyprus. He originally wrote his book in the Armenian language and used his skills as a translator to translate his work into English. Both versions are available now.

Hagopian's next book, *Life Within the Armenian Community of Cyprus*, in Armenian, will be published soon, to be followed by the English version. He will publish *Life Within the Armenian Community of the UAE*, both in Armenian and English.

You can now purchase *Life in the Armenian Community of Aleppo* on Amazon, and its original publication on Barnes & Noble.





ARTS & CULTURE

# Balakian’s Diyarbakir Visit Seems Like a Dream Now

DIYARBAKIR, from page 13

“In the hotel lobby, the poet Kawa Nemir sat waiting for me. A hip-looking guy around forty with a dark beard and thick black hair, he had mentioned the day before that he’d translated a couple of dozen British and American poets into Kurdish. I thought he meant a couple of dozen poems. But from his satchel he pulled a stack of bilingual editions of his Kurdish translations of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Stephen Crane, Sara Teasdale, Shakespeare’s sonnets, and more. I felt buoyed up by Nemir’s books, his knowledge, his immersion in poetry. Finding a fellow poet 8,000 miles from home reminded me that the fellowship of literature is universal. Nemir put the books in my hands. ‘Please, they’re for you.’

“Ten feet from the window of the popular Gabo Kitchen, the only vegan café in the city, I was jolted by a large poster announcing the reading with my face and Nemir’s. Was this the city where my grandmother’s family was massacred a hundred years ago? Were these the streets of blood and screams and death? We walked into the café, with its espresso bar and glass cases of pastry and sandwiches, and it could have been Greenwich Village. Reality and dream floating into each other. I felt out of place and time. The café was packed with young and old in jeans and T-shirts, scarves and bandanas, drinking espresso and beer, eating sandwiches. Journalists with tape recorders stood along one wall. Osman Kavala, tall and thin with a bushy beard and a head of curly hair, was leaning quietly against the bar, as if to be as invisible as possible. A protector of peace, a lover of community, he was there to make sure everything would go smoothly.

“In the photos I’m looking at to reconstruct the evening, I see Nemir in a tan polo shirt and khaki chinos, his hair glistening in the overhead light. I’m in a black silk short-sleeve and black jeans, leaning over the reading table with a mike. On the wall behind us is a huge photograph of Gabriel Garcia Marquez in a chair, reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Nemir and I decided I would read half a dozen poems — he would translate every two stanzas — and he would close with a few of his own.”

**In Discussion Later with the *Mirror-Spectator***

When asked whether there was any opportunism he sensed in the welcome of the Kurds — who no longer fear Armenians returning to reclaim their lost properties and who may benefit politically from Armenian support — Balakian answered by recalling the welcome he got from them: “I found the Kurdish warmth and welcome to be as sincere as you could imagine given that we were tourists and they were our hosts in that context. Their responses to us were pleasantly shocking given the cold shoulder we got in Kars or Elazig or other places in the east. You could feel a vulnerability, too, in their warmth.”

On the other hand, he noted that no one spoke directly about their own ancestors’ role in the killing of the Armenians. Balakian

said, “In fact, anyone of them could have had grandparents who killed my grandmother’s and grandfather’s family.” Despite this, he continued, “They were certainly sympathetic to us for what happened in the Armenian Genocide.

In his *AGNI* essay Balakian described his mother’s complex evasiveness when she was asked some questions by Kurdish journalists after the reading. He speculated that her very silence was itself a message. She carried, in Balakian’s words, “a silence transmitted to her by deeply traumatized parents.” Queried now as to whether she had said anything further about her feelings and the trip after her return to the US, Balakian replied that she did not have anything to say.

Balakian ruminated on the role of poetry and art concerning historical crimes and their victims, when material factors appear to be predominant. He said, “Poetry and other art forms have a great capacity to focus history — to bring a sharp lens or angle of vision, to probe the event. And this involves a fresh representation of the event as it plays out in the artist’s mind years after the factual event. Artists bring images, narrative, complexity of human encounter, emotion, vision, insight in ways that are different from, say, scholarship or journalism — both of which are vitally important, of course.”

In other words, he continued, “Works of art can serve (this is not a requirement — as embodiments for change, consciousness raising, and bridges to social justice. Works of art create community across borders and distances. ‘We live on images,’ as the psychiatrist and historian Robert Jay Lifton writes, and so art has a long life. We still read Sophocles and Homer and Shakespeare.” Armenians, he said, “around the world are united, in part, by works they identify with — the paintings of [Arshile] Gorky, [Martiros] Saryan, [Hovhannes/Ivan] Aivazovsky, the music of Gomidas [Vartabed] or the Armenian Navy Band, and poets like [Yeghishe] Charents, [Vahan] Tekeyan. You can fill in the blanks.”

In the current situation, with more recent tragedies such as the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh and the seemingly precarious status of the Republic of Armenia itself urgently clamoring for attention and remedy, some readers might wonder whether Armenians and others should still devote time and energy to recalling the events in Western Armenia of over a century ago.

Balakian observed: “Armenia’s struggles are all connected in one longer complex history. No one can understand Armenia’s present dilemmas and serious problems without understanding the Armenian Genocide and its aftermath. Everything emanates from that epic event of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the wake of that catastrophe, anyone who studies history should see that Armenians are a tenacious, high achieving, Christian culture, wedged in a difficult part of the world, where their efforts to create an independent state on as much of their historic homeland as possible, has been smashed and thwarted by their more powerful conquerors and neighbors — the Ottoman Turkish Empire, later the Turkish Republic, and

Azerbaijan, the Turkic nation to the east. Armenia also has been dependent on the whims, self-interest, and sometimes support of powerful nations. Armenia needs support and protection from reliable powerful nations that appreciate Armenia’s contributions to civilization over the millennia, and appreciate Armenia’s example as a nation that has survived Genocide — a nation of resilience and creativity in the face of great odds.”

The *Mirror-Spectator* asked Balakian if he still believes in the significance of individual Armenian ties to their ancestral cities or villages in Western Armenia for future generations. He said, “As long as our community is well educated about Armenian history and culture, as long as we as a culture and community transmit the history and culture of Armenia and its long and significant past to future gener-

ations, Armenians will feel connected to their homeland in Western Armenia. And, that of course means maintaining a solid knowledge of the Armenian Genocide — the event that expelled Armenians from Anatolia/Western Armenia, what is today Turkey. There is no substitute for education and a serious knowledge of history.”

As to what reactions or feedback Balakian has received from Kurdish and Turkish readers, as well as others, Balakian declared, “I’ve had a lot of responses from Armenian and American readers, but I think my essay needs to get around more before I get responses from the others.”

Copies of Balakian’s original article may be obtained for \$13.95 from *AGNI* Magazine, Boston University, 236 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215 or online at <https://agnionline.bu.edu/order/issues/?product=agni98>.

CALENDAR

OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

MASSACHUSETTS

**FEBRUARY 10 — A Valentine’s Concert of Classical Music at Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church, 200 Lexington St., Belmont. 6 p.m. Concert will feature violinist Haig Hovsepian and pianist Ani Hovsepian. Tickets are \$25 and a reception will follow at the church’s Nishan and Margrit Atinizian Hall. For ticket reservations call 617-389-2280 or email [holycrossboston-ma@ggamil.com](mailto:holycrossboston-ma@ggamil.com).**

**FEBRUARY 10 — St. James Reunion Dance Featuring The Yerakouyn Band and DJ Arden. Hosted by the St. James ACYOA Seniors. All ages welcome. Mezze 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/reuniondance](https://tiny.cc/reuniondance).**

**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 America 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](mailto: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](mailto:armenjeknavorian@gmail.com); or Ara, 617-803-2612, [ara.a.jeknavorian@gmail.com](mailto: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](http://amarasonline.com)**

Send Calendar Items to the Mirror-Spectator: To send calendar items to the Mirror-Spectator, email [alin@mirrorspectator.com](mailto:alin@mirrorspectator.com) or [alin.gregorian@gmail.com](mailto:alin.gregorian@gmail.com). You can also visit our website, [www.mirrorspectator.com](http://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.

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COMMENTARY

THE ARMENIAN  
**MIRROR  
SPECTATOR**  
— SINCE 1932 —



An ADL Publication

THE FIRST ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
ARMENIAN WEEKLY IN THE  
UNITED STATES

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The Armenian Mirror-Spectator is  
published weekly, except two weeks in  
July and the first week of the year, by:

Baika Association, Inc.

755 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown, MA  
02472-1509

Telephone: 617-924-4420

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SUBSCRIPTION RATES

U.S.A.	\$80 one year
Canada	\$125 one year
Other Countries	\$200 one year

© 2014 The Armenian Mirror-Spectator  
Periodical Class Postage Paid at Boston,  
MA and additional mailing offices.

ISSN 0004-234X

Postmaster: Send address  
changes to The Armenian  
Mirror-Spectator, 755 Mount  
Auburn St.,  
Watertown, MA 02472

Other than the Editorial, views  
and opinions expressed in this  
newspaper do not necessarily  
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publisher.

# Defining Nation and State

By Vahan Zanoian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

“For what will profit a man if he gains the whole world,  
and loses his own soul?”

— Mark 8, 36.

There is an Armenian state today because the Armenian nation persisted when it was stateless. The nation is larger than the state by all measures — population, history, economic and financial resources, education levels, diplomatic skills, global reach, and overall competence levels. The nation is also more permanent than the state; it has survived without a state for most of its history. During centuries when there was no Armenian state, it was the nation, with its steadfast attachment to its culture, language, literature, faith, traditions, historical legacy, collective memory, and a resolute awareness of its own history, that kept the hope and the prospect of an eventual State alive.

It would thus be the ultimate historical irony if the state, which owes its existence to the resilience of the nation, were to decide that the nation’s identity and historical legacy are no longer part of its own identity and history. The state is entrusted to safeguard something much larger than itself. The state is both a goal in itself and, much more importantly, an instrument to uphold national identity, culture, and historic rights. It is a protection against allowing the nation to be left at the mercy of the cultural dominance and lifestyles of other states.

A state stripped of the timeless legacy of its nation is like a body without a soul. It is a robot that goes through the motions of economic growth and trade, strictly for the purpose of economic growth and trade. It gets reduced to the least common denominator that all other states in the world share, and nothing more. As far as its unique national character is concerned, it is clinically dead.

What would an Armenian state turn into if stripped of its Armenian character and historical legacy? That, as much if not more than the military threats posed by Azerbaijan’s dictatorial regime, is the existential question hanging over the Armenian nation and the Republic of Armenia today. Ironically, that threat is nurtured from within, even if it has some formidable cheerleaders from outside.

The last attempt in recent history to bury the Armenian national identity in a soulless collective was during the Soviet Union. Two to three generations were raised to be model Soviet citizens. Nationality was deemed to be a burden weighing down on the Soviet citizens’ journey towards Communism. But even in the darkest years of Stalinist repression, when some of the brightest minds of the Armenian nation, along with hundreds of thousands of innocent people, were being purged, the nation pushed back. Intellectual giants such as Hrachya Ajarian, scientists such as Viktor Hambartsumian (Ambartsumian), poets such as Avetis Isahakian, Hovhanness Shiraz, Yeghishe Charents, Silva Kaputikyan, artists such as Yervand Kochar, and many, many others, kept the flame of national awareness alive, often secretly and often by risking their lives. The national resistance against assimilation into the vast void of Soviet identity was formidable, eventually resulting in grassroots popular outbursts in 1965 and 1988.

The survivors of the Armenian Genocide demonstrated an even stronger determination not to lose their national identity. The first generation of the survivors is especially noteworthy, because, arriving at totally unfamiliar and foreign lands, barely alive, having lost all material, emotional and spiritual connection to a life it once had, it started all over again with a single-minded determination not to lose its national identity and culture, lest the perpetrators of the Genocide achieve their goal. Communities which could barely scrape enough to feed their children opened schools, built churches, theaters, cultural and sports clubs, all in the name of «haya-bahbanoum», guardianship of Armenianness. Armenian schools flourished and excelled in their host countries, with graduates not only excelling in universities and later in their chosen professions, but also in developing a keen sense of their history and ancestry. Professional excellence and a strong national education were never mutually exclusive.

Then, what had seemed a distant, unlikely dream came to pass. After 543 years of statelessness, the First Republic was born. A nation just expelled from its ancestral lands and its history, massacred, ethnically cleansed, having lost over 1.5 million people, established a State. It did not last long, being squeezed between the newly formed Soviet Empire and the dying Ottoman Empire. But

it still fought for its national identity, despite all the efforts of the Bolsheviks to erase it.

Finally, even the Soviet Empire collapsed.

One would think that this nation, which, against all odds has maintained its unique culture through several centuries of foreign rule, having finally gained its own independent sovereign state, would double up on its genetic capacity to survive, to struggle, to fight for a high national purpose, rather than succumb to the pressure to turn its rare and precious Statehood into a sterilized generic entity void of national character and historical context.

And yet, that is the path that the Armenian government seems to have adopted. At least all the telltale signs seem to be pointing in that direction, the most direct and ominous being the government’s adopted position that its sole responsibility is whatever lies within the 29,800 sq km area that it recognizes and accepts as the territory of the Republic of Armenia (never mind that Armenia’s most immediate and aggressive enemy, Azerbaijan, has yet to recognize the same area as sovereign Armenian territory, part of which it still occupies). Everything beyond that area — which includes some of the richest and most valuable Armenian historical and cultural legacy — is deemed to fall outside the scope of responsibility of the Armenian state, and therefore irrelevant to it. The first direct casualty of this approach was Artsakh, a millennia-old Armenian homeland.

One of the standard practices of the Soviet authorities aimed at stifling national sentiments in Armenia was to drive a wedge between the local population and the diaspora. Contact with compatriots abroad was strictly controlled and monitored. The policy was applied especially strictly toward repatriated Armenians who had relatives abroad. They were treated with suspicion, and many were exiled to Siberia for the crime of being nationalistic. But both local intellectuals and diasporan organizations fought this policy. Armenian literary magazines and periodicals published in the diaspora were regularly smuggled into Soviet Armenia, and treasured by local intellectuals, passed from hand to hand and read with a passion.

Narrowing the government’s focus from the nation to the current Republic achieves the result which the Soviet authorities sought, without coercion and without wagonloads of exiles to Siberia. It alienates a substantial portion of the nation that live outside of the 29,800 sq km area but has a profound attachment both to the country and to the nation at large. Specific policies and some declared intentions that formalize and deepen the schism between the country and the nation include: changing the Armenian History course to The History of Armenia in schools, rewriting history books to appease the whims of Azerbaijan and Turkey, admitting that sections in the Constitution of the Republic Armenia are offensive to Azerbaijan and therefore need to be rewritten, succumbing to pressure from Turkey to discard Genocide recognition as a State objective (when Erdogan himself recently proudly and publicly bragged about Turkey’s massacre of the Greek population of Smyrna), questioning the appropriateness of the country’s Coat of Arms to the Republic that was formed in 1991, and teaching schoolchildren that those who say Ararat is our highest mountain are not talking about Armenia but about something else.

While the Armenian nation fought back successfully, albeit with major sacrifices, when the Soviet Union tried to dissolve its national identity into a communal political notion, the current move in the same direction is more elusive and dangerous, because it is being stirred from within the country and is being led by the government, with significant prompts and encouragement from outside. National identity and character face the same threat of an amorphous global anonymity, whether it comes from Communism, Open Society, or direct demands from Turkey and Azerbaijan to tone down patriotic rhetoric in Armenia.

Fortunately, the now infamous 7th-grade history book has met serious resistance from teachers and historians. Some teachers have gone as far as advocating a boycott of the book. Veteran academicians and historians have also come out with their public criticism both of the 7th grade history book and of changing the name of the course from Armenian History to The History of Armenia. This is encouraging, but the uproar needs to be more broad-based to attract the attention of the populist government in Yerevan. Parents concerned with the education of their children must join the fight, not just by opposing the new history book, but also by organizing and introducing proper history instruction at home, to emphasize their lack of confidence in the curriculum of the government.

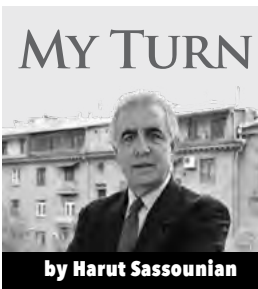
It is important to realize that ultimately, all of this boils down to national security. National security is about all the factors that makes a nation willing and able to defend its homeland. A modern, competitive army is obviously at the very core of the system and the main active ingredient. But even if Armenia had that today (which it does not) it would not be enough. The first orbit of enabling factors around that core includes military intelligence, military reform, competence in legal, diplomatic and information campaigns, economic security, and global competitiveness. A second, outer, orbit or shield is less tangible but equally critical: Sense of nationhood, historical legacy and context, national dignity, social justice, balanced education system, demographic management, national strategic vision, national values, ownership a unique culture, keen sense of national identity and of national historic rights. Once

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COMMENTARY



MY TURN  
Fake Names on List of Donors To Pashinyan’s Candidate for Yerevan Mayor

by Harut Sassounian

Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan has boasted for five years about his political party’s fair conduct in elections, blaming the former leaders of carrying out fraudulent elections. As the proverb says, “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

Pashinyan has used the considerable resources of his government to gain an unfair advantage over his political opponents during local and parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, some of the opposition candidates, following their election to a public office, are removed after being arrested, tried and jailed by pro-Pashinyan judges.

A recent example of fraud carried out by Pashinyan’s political party is the September 17, 2023 elections for the City Council of Yerevan. After ousting his own party member Hayk Marutyan from the position of mayor for daring to criticize the ruling party, Pashinyan planned to replace him with former Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan.

Pashinyan’s backers resorted to a typical fundraising trick to ensure that Avinyan, who had little public support, becomes the Mayor of Yerevan. To accomplish their objective, they raised over one million dollars in campaign funds from mysterious individuals under fake names, an investigation revealed.

Infocom.am journalists contacted many of the names on the donors’ list and found out that some of them were fake.

The scandal starts with a Pashinyan supporter borrowing the ID card of a friend to donate using her name 2.5 million dram (\$6,200), the maximum amount allowed by law, to Pashinyan’s political party, Civil Contract. This lady’s ID card was used to hide the real donor’s name. Unbeknownst to her, she was listed as a large donor to Pashinyan’s party. The fraudulent transaction took place on July 31, 2023, hours before a fundraising event held later that evening during which Pashinyan’s party claimed that 987 donors had raised over one million dollars (506 million dram), for the City Council race.

When asked by the media, Pashinyan’s political party refused to make the donors’ names public. Only after the Freedom of Information Center filed a lawsuit, the party disclosed the list of donors with fake names on January 12, 2024. The list included 996 names who had donated nearly \$1.3 million (509 million dram) to the campaign.

When the lady, who was reported as donating 2.5 million dram, saw her name on the donors’ list, she was very upset. Infocom.am contacted other names on the donors’ list. Many of them were surprised that their names were used as donors to a political campaign. 87% of the donors were listed

as donating over a million dram each, 70% of whom (140 individuals) were listed as donating the maximum amount of 2.5 million dram. Among the large donors were 88 candidates for City Council from the ruling Civil Contract party.

Infocom.am disclosed that the largest donors were the owners of major corporations, their executives and employees. Eight of the large donors worked for a single prominent company. It was confirmed that its employees had not donated from their personal funds, but the business owners had paid in their names. Several other big businessmen were listed as donating the maximum amount. Among the donors on the list were the names of employees of the City Council of Yerevan.

Infocom.am, after contacting the donors on the list provided by the Civil Contract party, concluded that some of the names on the donors’ list are “at least suspicious. The investigation showed that through organized mechanisms, funds of unknown origin were directed to the Civil Contract party’s fundraising, sometimes under the names of citizens who were generally unaware of the process.” In addition, since the law does not allow fundraising donations in cash, Infocom.am asked Avinyan’s campaign officials how the donations were made during the fundraising event. They answered that employees of ‘Hayeconobank’, who were present, transferred the cash to the account of the party. Among the shareholders of Hayeconobank is the ruling party parliament member and well-known oligarch Khachatur Sukiasyan, known as Grzo.

Infocom.am told the deputy head of the Civil Contract party Vahagn Aleksanyan that the donors it contacted said that they have made no such donations. Aleksanyan asked for the names of these individuals in order to verify them. When told that Infocom.am cannot disclose their names, Aleksanyan replied that perhaps they did not identify the correct individuals.

According to the law, the government can inspect the fundraising of a campaign only eight months after the election. The law states that by May 31 of the year following an election, political parties have to present their financial reports to the Anti-Corruption Committee.

When Infocom.am asked the former President of the Central Election Committee Vahagn Hovakimyan, a former Parliament member from the Civil Contract party, about its refusal to disclose the list of donors, Hovakimyan replied: “You are treating the political forces as potential criminals.”

This is a clear illustration of the fraud committed by Pashinyan’s party during the elections for the City Council of Yerevan. Nevertheless, the election was not as successful as expected for the ruling party. Avinyan was elected mayor only after the opposition parties, which had more City Council members than the ruling party, had failed to combine their votes to elect their own candidate for mayor.

This is the sad picture of the so-called democracy in Armenia. I seriously doubt that the Anti-Corruption Committee will take any legal action against Pashinyan’s political party for violating election laws.

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that outer layer is pierced, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the rest of the national security apparatus functional.

While a state must have a defined geographic area recognized by the international community, its defense cannot be understood purely in geographic terms. Armies defend a homeland, not just real estate. What any soldier fights for cannot be measured by square kilometers. What makes that homeland is all the factors listed above as part of the outer orbit of national security. Decoupling the government agenda from a national agenda in the name of “saving the state,” which necessitates forsaking the pursuit of historic national rights, is internally contradictory and self-defeating, and puts the interests of both the state and the nation at great risk.

The Armenian nation does not need just a state. It needs a nation-state. Most of the diaspora, as well as most of the current citizens and residents of Armenia, have much better options than the Republic of Armenia if all it had to offer was a non-national state where they could live in peace and earn a living. Armenians can live in peace better and earn a better living in any country in Europe, the US, Canada, or the Middle East. Some would do better even in today’s Russia. What attracts them to Armenia is that it is a nation state — that is what differentiates Armenia from all other countries and fills a need that no other country, no matter how prosperous and free, can fill. If the Armenian State decides to rid itself of its national content, it will no longer have anything to offer to the Armenian population either in Armenia or in the rest of the world.

Anyone who takes a careful look at the map of Armenia and the region, will see that the Republic of Armenia cannot be defended without the entire Nation that gave birth to it. This is what any governing body of the Republic must understand. Today’s government not only does not understand this but outright rejects the premise. It needs to take a better look at the map and its nation’s history. As mentioned earlier, the first direct casualty of this failure was Artsakh, an integral part of the Armenian homeland, which was recently subjected, in full view of the world, to complete ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan. This could indeed be the precursor or more heavy losses if the government fails to chart a new course.

(Vahan Zanoian is a global energy and security specialist. Over a span of 35 years, he has advised 15 different governments on economic development policy, energy sector strategy, national security, and global competitiveness. He has also served as a consultant to numerous international and national oil companies, banks, and other public and private organizations. Author’s Note: This article discusses issues and critiques specific policies of the government of Armenia. It intentionally does not name any Armenian government official, and does not use derogatory adjectives, in order to remain faithful to the recommendations of another [article](#) on literate and consequential public political discourse.)

Noubar Afeyan to Deliver MIT’s 2024 Commencement Address

MIT, from page 1

“MIT is a place where audacious ideas abound, thanks in large part to its remarkable students. I’m thrilled to address the Class of 2024 as they prepare to make an impact in the world. We need their curiosity, imagination, inventiveness, courage, and determination — now more than ever,” Afeyan says.

A member of the MIT Corporation, Afeyan has a long relationship with the Institute. He earned his PhD in biochemical engineering at MIT in 1987 and was a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management for 16 years, starting in 2000. Among other activities, he serves on the advisory board of the MIT Abdul Latif Jameel Clinic for Machine Learning, and has spoken at numerous Institute events, including MIT Solve.

“Afeyan has shown repeatedly that outstanding scientific talent, when relentlessly focused on audacious goals, can yield breakthroughs that many thought were impossible. His prolific record of invention, along with his coaching, funding, and mentoring of scores of science-driven startup businesses, provides a user’s guide on how to channel advances in science and technology to promote the public good,” says James Poterba, the Mitsui Professor of Economics and the chair of the Commencement Committee.

Born in Beirut to Armenian parents, Afeyan is a staunch advocate for the contributions of immigrants to economic and scientific progress. He is the co-founder of the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity and a number of other philanthropic projects.

“I’m excited to learn from Dr. Afeyan as our commencement speaker. His work in biotechnology and entrepreneurship is truly inspiring, and I can’t wait to hear the insights and experiences that he will share with us,” senior class president Penny Brant said.

“I hold great admiration for the groundbreaking work of Moderna and its revolutionary vaccine development. Dr. Afeyan’s contributions to the field of biotechnology are truly commendable. As the UA president and a representative of my constituents, I am interested to hear what insights he will share with our graduating class,” Andre Hamelberg, president of the Undergraduate Association, said.

“I think it’s great that our speaker will have shared so many of our experiences. I’m excited for what advice he will offer us all,” Mikala Molina, president of the Graduate Student Council, says.

Afeyan joins notable recent MIT Commencement speakers including YouTuber and inventor Mark Rober (2023); Director-General of the World Trade Organization Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (2022); lawyer and social justice activist Bryan Stevenson (2021); retired U.S. Navy four-star admiral William McRaven (2020); three-term New York City mayor and philanthropist Michael Bloomberg (2019); and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg (2018).



# Armenian American Museum Construction Gears Up

GLENDALE — The Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center of California celebrated a milestone with the installation of the first structural steel beams at the construction site of the anticipated cultural and educational center.

“We are thrilled to witness the structure of the museum rising and taking shape,” stated Executive Vice Chairman Zaven Kazazian. “We are grateful for our community’s unwavering support to build a landmark center that will advance education, preservation, and enrichment for future generations.”

The institution is currently under construction in the museum campus at Glendale Central Park. The first phase of construction featuring the museum parking garage and building foundation has been completed. The second phase of construction featuring the two-level 50,820 square foot museum build-

ing superstructure is currently underway.

PNG Builders, the General Contractor for the museum project, contracted with Muhlhauser Steel as the structural steel subcontractor following a competitive bidding process. Muhlhauser Steel is based in Southern California and brings more than four decades of experience with commercial, industrial, educational, and entertainment facility projects.

The mission of the museum is to promote understanding and appreciation of America’s ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Armenian American experience. The museum will offer a wide range of public programming through the Permanent Exhibition, Temporary Exhibitions, Auditorium, Learning Center, Demonstration Kitchen, Archives Center, and more.

Learn more about the museum project at [ArmenianAmericanMuseum.org](http://ArmenianAmericanMuseum.org).





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 \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

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