



Ruben Vardanyan

### Vardanyan Family Calls for Unconditional Release of Ruben Vardanyan and 22 Other Armenian Prisoners

YEREVAN — On May 17, the family of Ruben Vardanyan, the former state minister of the Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic, issued a statement decrying the Azerbaijani government’s extension of the pre-trial detention of Vardanyan and his fellow political leaders for a further five months.

The Armenian leaders have been under arrest since September 27, 2023.

The family said in a statement, “For eight months, the Azerbaijani authorities have flouted international law and human decency by keeping Ruben incarcerated without trial and without any proper process. They still refuse to say when any proper trial or hearing will take place on their so called charges. This decision to extend his detention by another five months without any due process is another gross violation of his basic human rights. While the international pressure on Azerbaijan continues to grow through the European Parliament resolution, US congress sanction bill and the French Senate resolution, we, the Vardanyan family, call on representatives of the international community — government, business and civil society — to demand for Ruben’s unconditional release and the 22 other Armenian prisoners if Azerbaijan is to maintain the privilege to host COP29, which Azerbaijan has proclaimed to be the ‘COP of peace.’

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### Protesters Detained at Armenian Border Village

By Gayane Saribekian and Robert Zargarian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Police made at least 14 arrests on Monday, May 20, as they confronted angry protesters trying to enter an Armenian border village that is losing part of its territory as a result of the Armenian government’s territorial concessions to Azerbaijan.

The village of Kirants remained cordoned off by security forces for the second consecutive day amid continuing preparations for the hand-over of several of its houses as well as much of its agricultural land and a section of a highway leading to Yerevan. Local residents discovered in the morning three new border posts placed there and masked security personnel guarding them.

“When I left my house I saw a post put in the orchard created by my father, with armed men standing near it,” one of them told RFE/RL’s Armenian Service. “I got angry and told them to get out of the orchard created by my father.”

The land in and around Kirants is one of four border areas which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s administration has agreed to cede to Azer-

as the top leader of protests in the affected communities that broke out following the announcement of the land transfer on April 19. Galstanyan



Police block a road leading to Kirants village, May 19, 2024

baijan in what it calls a start of the delimitation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The areas are also adjacent to three other villages in Armenia’s northern Tavush province.

Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, the prelate of the Tavush Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, emerged

took his campaign to Yerevan where he attracted tens of thousands of demonstrators and demanded Pashinyan’s resignation on May 9.

Together with a large group of supporters, Galstanyan headed back to Kirants on Monday to show see BORDER, page 2

### Mirzoyan Calls for Prohibition of Threats against Nuclear Facilities at Vienna Nuclear Safety Conference

VIENNA (Armenpress) — On May 20, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan took part in the International Conference on Nuclear Security (ICONS 2024) titled “Shaping the Future,” in Vienna.

Representatives from more than 130 countries were participating in the conference.

At the beginning of the conference, all participants observed a minute of silence in memory of the Iran’s high-level officials, including the president and the foreign minister, who died the day

before due to a helicopter crash.

In his comments, Mirzoyan stressed that Armenia opposes proliferation of nuclear weapons. “As a committed advocate for non-proliferation, Armenia reaffirms its unwavering commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and other relevant treaties, alongside full compliance with IAEA safeguards agreements and additional protocols,” he said.

Much of his comments hinted at Azerbaijan’s threatening stance towards Armenia’s nuclear power plant, Metsamor, outside Yerevan. He also advocated for continued dialogue amongst nations.

“In the past decade, our global landscape has undergone significant changes marked by rapid transformations and the emergence of unforeseen challenges, including from advancement of technologies. In response, it is imperative that our national nuclear security frameworks remain adaptable and resilient to new and emerging threats. Fostering a broad dialogue, information exchange, and the implementation of best practices are paramount in ef-

fectively identifying and mitigating these evolving threats,” he said.

Mirzoyan added, “Recalling the relevant IAEA General Conference Resolutions and Decision, Armenia



Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan in Vienna

reiterates its principal position that any attack or threat of attack against nuclear facilities devoted to peaceful purposes constitutes a violation of the principles of the United Nations Charter, International law, and the Statute of the Agency. The position of Armenia is principal in this regard, but also driven by past experience in light of undisguised threats against its nuclear power plant.

see NUCLEAR, page 2

### Armenia Offers Condolences to Iran, as Reports Indicate Raisi Had Canceled Planned Visit to Armenia

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia’s political leadership and opposition figures expressed on Monday, May 20, condolences over the deaths of Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a helicopter crash.

The deaths were announced early in the morning after Iranian authorities found the wreckage of the helicopter that carried Raisi, Amir-Abdollahian and six other passengers and crew, in the mountainous terrain near Iran’s border with Azerbaijan.

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Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev mere hours before Raisi’s death, in Azerbaijan.

YEREVAN  
EngageArmenia2024  
Forum: Reconnecting  
Diasporans with  
Armenia



MICHIGAN  
Commemorating  
Genocide through  
‘Shared Memories’ at  
University of Michigan



BOSTON  
Couple Seeks New  
Home for Painting that  
Captures Genocide  
Tragedy, Triumph







ARMENIA

## NEWS from ARMENIA

### Galstanyan Meets with Karabakh Government Members, MPs

YEREVAN (News.am) — Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, leader of the Tavush for the Homeland movement and Primate of the Diocese of Tavush of the Armenian Apostolic Church, met with the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) government members, MPs, and community leaders in downtown Yerevan, on May 21.

Later in the day, he met with experts, analysts, political scientists, and NGOs' representatives.

### Podcasters Released From Custody

Yerevan (Panorama.am) — Political prisoners Narek Samsonyan and Vazgen Saghatelian were released from pre-trial custody on May 21.

The activists, who co-host the Imnemnimi podcast, were detained on charges of hooliganism on March 22 after using slurs to criticize Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his government for their plans to cede territories to Azerbaijan.

Judge Arman Hovhannisyan of Yerevan's Criminal Code on Tuesday ordered their release, but banned them from hosting the Imnemnimi podcast and other programs for three months.

The next court hearing has been scheduled for June 18.

### Khachaturyan Praises Peace Corps Activities

YEREVAN (News.am) — President Vahagn Khachaturyan received US Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien, and head of the Washington Office of the US Peace Corps, Carol Spahn, on May 21.

He lauded the activities of the US Peace Corps in Armenia for nearly three decades, the president's office announced.

"I am confident that this visit will also have positive results and will contribute to the expansion of Peace Corps initiatives and programs in various fields. Of course, the activities of the Corps carried out in various regions of Armenia and, in particular, in the field of education, which is a priority field for the Armenian government, are also appreciated. I think that you are well aware of the problems and challenges that we have in the field of education, and in this regard your support and joint programs are very important," the president noted.

The guests, for their part, noted that they are pleased to have the opportunity to be represented in Armenia and contribute to the development of the country.

During the meeting, youth education, leadership courses, volunteering, and some other domains were discussed. The programs implemented by the Corps in various regions of Armenia and among the youth were especially highlighted.

Reforms in Armenia in recent years were touched upon as well. Khachaturyan stressed the importance of the assistance by the US government and authorities in this reform process.



Masked security officers guard a new border post placed in Kirants, May 20, 2024

# Protesters Detained Outside Armenian Border Village

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support for its residents. Security forces did not allow his convoy of vehicles as well as opposition lawmakers and journalists accompanying him to enter the village.

"This is completely illegal," Galstanyan said at a police roadblock set up on a highway leading to the village 160 kilometers north of the Armenian capital.

His furious supporters argued and jostled with scores of police officers deployed there. Some of them were dragged away and detained as a result. The police reported 14 arrests later in the day.

Meanwhile, Galstanyan somehow managed to sneak into Kirants and to talk to some villagers. He urged them not to "get distressed," saying that he will keep pushing for Pashinyan's removal from power.

"We are strong," replied one local woman.

"Nobody can hamper or intimidate us in any way and in any place. Our cause is about the truth," Galstanyan said after a police vehicle escorted him back to the roadblock outside the village.

The 53-year-old cleric then returned to

Yerevan to continue his daily meetings with various political factions, professional associations, artists and other prominent public figures aimed at drumming up greater support for his anti-government movement. The movement has already been joined or endorsed by virtually all Armenian opposition groups.

Galstanyan has scheduled his next major rally for May 26. He has hinted that it will mark the beginning of nonstop street protests designed to force Armenia's government-controlled parliament to oust Pashinyan through a vote of no confidence.

Parliamentary leaders of Pashinyan's Civil Contract party say that none of the pro-government lawmakers will defect from the prime minister's political team. They have condemned the anti-government protests as a coup attempt.

The first group of border guards was spotted there on Saturday. They are replacing Armenian army units that are due to

withdraw from the four border areas adjacent to several Tavush villages.

Unlike the other border villages, Kirants would lose not only agricultural land but also some of its houses and a key bridge connecting it to the rest of the country. Angry local residents again staged protests on Thursday the day after the government resumed preparations for the land transfer seen by them as a serious security risk.

Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures Gnel Sanosyan visited Kirants on Saturday in a bid to allay their concerns. He reiterated government pledges to build a road bypass for the community.

"We will build the road and that will automatically bring security," claimed Sanosyan.

The protesting villagers dismissed his assurances. As one of them said, "When the Azerbaijanis come and stand here, how can I live here?" How can my children live here?"

## Armenian Journalists Injured by Riot Police

By Naira Bulghadarian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — One Armenian journalist was hit by a police vehicle and another knocked unconscious while covering police crackdowns on protesters in Yerevan demanding Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's resignation, on May 14.

The violent incidents condemned by Armenian media associations happened on Tuesday and Monday respectively when police detained scores of people blocking streets in the city center as part of the continuing anti-government protests led by Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan.

A police van struck Nare Gevorgyan of Mediahub.am on one of those streets. Gevorgyan, who was taken to the hospital from the scene, said she avoided a serious injury despite feeling a "terrible pain in my knee."

"I briefly lost my vision at that point, and if it weren't for the police major, Mr. Levon Ghazaryan, I would have definitely fallen," she told RFE/RL's Armenian Service.

Gevorgyan said she believes another officer who drove the van hit her deliberately. She claimed that other police cars were

"also driving into people" who disrupted traffic through that street.

Armenia's Investigative Committee said later in the day that it has opened a criminal case in connection with the incident described by it as a "violation of road safety rules." The law-enforcement agency did not immediately charge anyone.

The other injured reporter, Meri Manukyan of 24news.am, also accused the police of deliberately toppling her during the dispersal of a similar protest in Yerevan on Monday. Manukyan lost her consciousness and was hospitalized as a result.

The incident drew strong condemnation from eight local press freedom groups. In a joint statement issued late on Monday, they said Manukyan is the fifth Armenian journalist physically attacked by security forces since the beginning of the protests. It deplored the fact that no police officer is known to have been held accountable for the "totally unjustified use of force."

The statement also demanded that the Armenian police finally take "serious measures to ensure the unhindered work of journalists and cameramen and exclude violence against them during mass protest actions."

### Mirzoyan Calls for Prohibition of Threats Against Nuclear Facilities

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"The inviolability, safety, and security of peaceful nuclear facilities should be unconditionally observed also in times of armed conflicts. In this regard, Armenia recalls the importance of the Seven Indispensable Pillars introduced by the Director General, as a bare minimum for ensuring the safety and security of peaceful nuclear facilities. In light of this, Armenia once again commends the dedicated and tireless efforts of the Director-General and the personnel of the IAEA."

He concluded, "Our aim is to generate international understanding and acceptance that there is a need to revitalize the process of developing an international legally binding treaty prohibiting armed attacks and threats of attacks against nuclear facilities devoted to peaceful purposes."





ARMENIA

# EngageArmenia2024 Forum

## *Reconnecting Diasporans with Armenia*

YEREVAN — After years of Covid-19 travel restrictions as well as years of news about war and attacks on Armenian territories, it was once again prime time for Armenian organizational representatives to visit diasporan communities with a call for active engagement. A call for engagement, now. This was how the EngageArmenia2024 European tour came to life. The H. Hovnanian Family Foundation, in addition to promoting volunteerism and repatriation through its Birthright Armenia, Armenian Volunteer Corps and Repat Armenia programs, organized and sponsored the Forum with 12 professionals from Armenia, working in the sectors of education, business/investment consulting, social enterprise, tourism, and mentoring to also join #EngageArmenia as presenters.

The tour, which ran from March 6 to 13, 2024, concluded with an impressive turnout of over 700 attendees across eight strategic cities for the Diaspora: London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Alfortville, Geneva, Lyon and Marseille. During this series of events, representatives of various



Sevan Kabakian of Birthright Armenia in Amsterdam

Armenian organizations opened the dialogue and answered multiple questions of the Diaspora Armenians who were wondering why and how to be engaged with Armenia, in times of great challenges and uncertainties. The goal was to give concrete tools to the audience for connecting and contributing meaningfully to Armenia's future. The organizations that presented included: Impact Hub Yerevan, Via Fund,

### Family Calls for Unconditional Release Of Ruben Vardanyan

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"The repeated extensions of pre-trial detention without an individualized and specific determination to justify the denial of bail is another flagrant violation of Ruben's rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a treaty to which Azerbaijan is a state party. The only explanation for the extended delays is this case is political and that Azerbaijan doesn't have any actual evidence against Ruben to put him on trial. Therefore, he should be immediately and unconditionally released," said Jared Genser, the Vardanyan family's international legal counsel.

Teach for Armenia, TUMO, Move2Armenia, Hub Artsakh, Tourism Committee, reArmenia, Optimize Consulting, Eqwey, National Network Media Platform and M.A.M. Foundation.

Birthright Armenia Director Sevan Kabakian, delivered the opening speech at every event, setting the tone for the tour: "We Armenians are very emotional people. And we put all that emotion in the way we see our relationship with the country. We are thrilled by the good news one day and depressed by the bad news the next day. The problem with this mostly emotional approach is that we get tired and become detached. Yet we need to do the exact opposite, since on all fronts our challenges have not ended. That's why now is the time for your real and unemotional involvement. Now is the time for a relationship that is grounded in the practical, important work for Armenia's success."

Each city contributed its own unique energy to the tour, young and older generations attending, fostering enthusiastic engagement. In Geneva for example, with 100 attendees, the representative of one of the local organizers Union Arménienne de Suisse, Miganouche Baghramian, expressed deep appreciation for the tour's thoughtful structure. "It was truly a pleasure for our community in Geneva to support such a remarkable initiative," she noted, praising

the representatives who shared "their positive energy with us and explained the tangible actions we can take for a stronger and better Armenia."

"We haven't come to convince you one way or another; we haven't come to blame you for living abroad either," stated Vartan Marashlyan, the director and co-founder of Repat Armenia. He challenged each attendee of the tour to consider their relationship with Armenia. "Do you take ownership of Armenia? While we highly encourage it, moving here is not the only way to feel ownership," he explained. In speaking with and surveying attendees, it was clear the honest dialogue about Armenia's challenges and opportunities, while encouraging a pragmatic approach to diaspora involvement, resonated with them. While about 20 percent of overall attendees expressed plans to relocate to Armenia in the next five years, there's still recognition of the need to engage Armenians who are disengaged.

The conclusion of the Engage Armenia Forum marked the beginning of conversations with the Armenian diaspora. To sustain and nurture these connections, not



only will Repat Armenia and Birthright Armenia aim to strengthen stronger ties with local institutions in the recently toured cities, but efforts are also underway to extend outreach into new countries, introducing tangible avenues for diaspora engagement with Armenia. Leveraging these partnerships will expand opportunities to host more events in the near future, fostering ongoing dialogue and collaboration.



In Paris, from left to right: Tigrane Yegavian (moderator), Nazareth Seferian, Hrayr Barsoumian, Vartan Marashlyan, Nelly Poliakov





## ARMENIA

# Armenia: Tax Records Tell Tale of Continuing Economic Dependency on Russia

Tax records in Armenia highlight the government's challenge in trying to disentangle the country's economy from Russia. The single largest taxpaying entity in Armenia, records show, is an electronics retailer that appears to generate a large share of profits from exports to Russia.

Since Azerbaijani forces reconquered Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian government has moved to distance itself from Russia, which many Armenians believe failed to live up to security commitments to defend Armenia's interests. Politically, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has been quick to bolster relations with the European Union and United States. But making a political shift is proving a faster process than reorienting the Armenian economy, which has long been focused northward toward Russia.

Trade with sanctions-strapped Russia has proven highly lucrative for many Armenian businesses, which have reportedly adapted to acting as middlemen for Russian consumers cut off from direct access to Western goods. No entity seems to have benefited more than Mobile Center, an Armenian mobile phone and electronics re-

tailer linked to local businessman Samvel Aleksanyan. The company's revenue, allegedly boosted by exports to Russia, was such that it has surpassed Armenia's largest mining company to become the largest taxpayer in Armenia, in terms of monetary contribution made to state coffers.

According to the Armenian government's State Revenue Committee (SRC), the agency collected over \$51 million (20 billion Armenian drams) from MobileCenter during the first quarter of 2024, three times higher than the taxes paid by the company during the same period the previous year. Prior to 2024, the company had not ranked among Armenia's top taxpaying entities.

The overall total of tax revenue gathered by the state during the first four months of 2024 reached about \$846 million (330 billion drams).

Mobile Center's tax payments topped Gazprom Armenia, the Russia-owned national gas distributor in Armenia, and Zangezur Copper and Molybdenum Combine, another company in Armenia with strong Russian ties.

Armenia's trade turnover with Rus-

sia skyrocketed following the invasion of Ukraine, with the country coming under wide suspicion of assisting Russia in sanctions evasion. Armenia's exports to Russia tripled in 2022 and doubled during the first half of 2023. Last fall, Armenian government officials said Russia accounts for almost 40 percent of Armenia's annual exports.

Another business, Yerevan City supermarket chains, also controlled by Aleksanyan, made it to the top 10 taxpayers list. The list also included two local tobacco companies, electronics and household stores, a telecommunications company and the Russian E-commerce firm Wildberries.

In addition to having the largest share of Armenia's foreign trade, Russia exerts influence over the Armenian economy in other ways, such as ownership of strategic assets. For example, the Russian energy giant Gazprom's Armenian affiliate, Gazprom Armenia, enjoys a monopoly over the natural gas supply. Russian Railways, meanwhile, controls the country's railroads.

(This article originally appeared on the website [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org) on May 17.)

## Another Top CIA Official Visits Armenia

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with the deputy director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, David Cohen, in Yerevan on Tuesday, May 21.

In a short statement on the meeting, Pashinyan's press office said they discussed US-Armenian relations and "issues pertaining to the international agenda." It did not elaborate.

Nor did the office release any photographs of the meeting, in contrast with its usual press releases on Pashinyan's face-to-face conversations with foreign officials.

CIA Director William Burns paid a sur-



David Cohen of the CIA

prise visit to Armenia in July 2022. He held talks with Pashinyan and Armen Grigoryan, the secretary of Armenia's Security Council. Two months later, Grigoryan visited the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia during a trip to the United States. No details of those talks were made public.

In December 2022, Grigoryan met with the head of Britain's foreign intelligence agency, Richard Moore, in London. A few days later, Moore flew to Yerevan for talks with Pashinyan. The two men met again in February this year on the sidelines of an international security conference in Munich.

Armenia's relationship with Russia has deteriorated significantly in recent years, with Pashinyan's government saying that Moscow is not honoring its security commitments to Yerevan and seeking closer ties with the West in what it calls a "diversification" of Armenian foreign policy.

Azerbaijan's recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh last September only added to the tensions between the two long-time allies. Moscow has since repeatedly accused Pashinyan of "destroying" Russian-Armenian relations.

## Catholicos of All Armenians Meets with Dr. Noubar Afeyan

ECHMIADZIN — Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, received the initiator of the Future Armenian movement, co-founder of the "Aurora" humanitarian initiative, renowned scientist and philanthropist Noubar Afeyan in the Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin on May 16.

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, the Legate of the Western Europe and the Representative of the Armenian Church to Holy See, was present at the meeting.

The Catholicos hailed Afeyan's visit to Armenia and Mother See Holy Echmiadzin, commending the latter's support to Armenia and Artsakh Armenians.

The Catholicos and Afeyan referred to the developments in Armenia, the security challenges faced by the Armenian people, as well as the problems of the occupation and depopulation of Artsakh, the protection of the rights of Artsakh Armenians, the release of Artsakh's military-political leadership and prisoners of war, and the preservation of Artsakh's spiritual and cultural heritage.

The two also touched upon the Armenia-Diaspora connection, the challenges faced by the Diaspora, emphasizing the programs aimed at the effective use of the potential of the Diaspora in these difficult times for the Motherland.



From left, Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II and Dr. Noubar Afeyan

## German Delegation Visits Armenia

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Secretary of the Armenian Security Council Armen Grigoryan received the delegation of the Foreign Relations Committee of the German Bundestag headed by Johannes Schraps on May 20.

According to Grigoryan's Office, he highlighted bilateral visits at the highest level and underscored the dynamics of stable development of Armenia-Germany relations.

Grigoryan briefed on the process of democratic reforms implemented in Armenia, the policy of diversification of the economic sphere and the cooperation in the field of energy.

The German side reaffirmed its ongoing support for the democratic reforms being implemented in Armenia and for the country's stability and security.



The members of the delegation from Germany, left, meet with their Armenian counterparts in Yerevan





## INTERNATIONAL



NATO delegation with officials from the Armenian Ministry of Defense

## NATO and Armenia Strengthen Cooperation in Defense Education

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — Representatives from the Armenian Ministry of Defense met with their counterparts at NATO Headquarters at the end of April to review activities conducted within the framework of NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) for Armenia, the ministry announced on May 21.

They took stock of the achievements made and set out the plan of joint activities for the rest of the year and for 2025. The Director of the Defense and Security Cooperation Directorate of NATO's Operations Division, Piers Cazalet, who also contributed to the annual review, noted: "The DEEP programme is an excellent tool to support Armenian military education system reforms and strengthen the country's cooperation with NATO."

The Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of

Armenia, Colonel Arthur Yeroyan, underlined the importance of regular stock-taking and highlighted the added value of NATO's cooperation through its Defense Education Enhancement Programme. He said: "As our Armed Forces are reforming and going through cultural changes, we are grateful for NATO's support in the key area of military education."

The Commandant of Armenia's Military Academy, Colonel Arsen Mangasaryan, added: "With the support of DEEP experts we implemented major changes in all levels of our educational curriculum, starting from cadets up to the most senior levels. It helped us to establish cooperation with many international partner institutions."

During the visit, Colonel Yeroyan also met with the Director of Cooperative Security Division of the NATO International Military Staff, Major General Darian Tiberiu Serban.

## France Blames Azerbaijan for New Caledonia Violence

PARIS (Al Jazeera) — France has accused Azerbaijan of being behind protests and violence that have rocked its Pacific island territory of New Caledonia for the past few days over the French government's decision to change a voting law.

Azerbaijan, which has traditionally had little presence in the Asia Pacific and is nearly 14,000km (8,700 miles) away from New Caledonia, has denied the allegations of interference.

But what's behind their diplomatic spat and how does New Caledonia figure in it?

Mass protests erupted in New Caledonia on May 14 after the French parliament passed reforms that allow French people who have lived in New Caledonia for 10 years or more to vote in local provincial elections in New Caledonia.

The French government has argued that these reforms uphold democracy in the archipelago. But local people — particularly those from the Indigenous Kanak communities, who make up 40 percent of the islands' population — fear this will undermine their efforts to win independence from France.

New Caledonia, one of the largest French overseas territories, is located between Australia and Fiji. France occupied the territory in 1853 and purposefully populated it with French citizens who displaced the Indigenous Kanak communities.

Five people have been killed and hundreds injured in the violent protests, which have been accompanied by looting and arson and are the worst violence New Caledonia has experienced in 30 years, experts

have said. In response, France declared a state of emergency in New Caledonia on Wednesday and deployed 500 additional military and police personnel to bolster the existing 1,800 police and gendarmes stationed in the territory.

France accused Azerbaijan of interference after Azerbaijani flags were seen alongside Kanak symbols at the protests. Images of such flags also started making rounds on social media.

Azerbaijan has been outspoken against what it sees as French colonialism. In July 2023, Baku invited pro-independence participants from the French territories of Martinique, French Guiana, New Caledonia and French Polynesia for a conference titled, "Towards the Complete Elimination of Colonialism."

This conference resulted in the formation of the Baku Initiative Group whose stated aim is to "support the just struggle of the peoples suffering from the colonial policy of France." This week, the Group released a statement expressing solidarity with the Indigenous Kanak people against the new French reforms. "We stand in solidarity with our Kanak friends and support their fair struggle," said the statement.

On Thursday, French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin told the TV channel, France 2, that Azerbaijan, alongside China and Russia, was "interfering" in New Caledonia.

"I regret that some of the Caledonian pro-independence leaders have made a deal with Azerbaijan," he alleged.

He added: "Even if there are attempts at interference ... France is sovereign on

its own territory, and so much the better."

Baku has denied the French interior minister's allegations.

"We refute any connection between the leaders of the struggle for freedom in Caledonia and Azerbaijan," Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Ayhan Hajizadeh said.

Azerbaijan has previously criticized French colonialism in overseas territories.

Tensions between France and Azerbaijan have also been simmering since France expressed support for Armenia in the conflict over the disputed, break-away Nagorno-Karabakh region which is claimed by both countries.

France, which has a sizeable Armenian diaspora of roughly 650,000 people, has sided with Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

In 2020, the French Senate adopted a resolution calling for the region's independence, prompting Azerbaijan to call for France to be stripped of its mediation role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Tensions between France and Azerbaijan further escalated during Baku's 2023 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. In September, France signed defense deals with Armenia and promised to deliver military equipment.

In response, Azerbaijan's foreign ministry released a statement saying, "The stance of France demonstrates that it refuses to learn from the current situation in the colonial regions that it faces today and continues its previous behavior and policy in this regard."

## INTERNATIONAL

## Catholicos Sends Condolence Message to Iran

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, sent a letter of condolence to Iran's Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei in connection with the tragic death of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and accompanying officials as a result of a helicopter crash.

On behalf of the Supreme Religious Council and the Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin Congregation, he expressed his grief to the bereaved families of the victims and the people of Iran, asking that the God support to Islamic Republic of Iran in overcoming the difficult trial.

## Top Armenian, Qatari Officials Discuss Regional Security

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — On the sidelines of his working visit to Doha, Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan on May 21 met with Hamad Khamis Al-Kubaisi, Deputy Secretary General of Qatar's National Security Council.

The Armenian Security Council said in a statement that the top officials discussed the prospects for the development of Armenia-Qatar relations, as well as possible economic, security and regional cooperation.

"The interlocutors also touched upon the regional security situation," the statement added.

## Armenia, Slovenia MFAs Confer about Latest Regional Developments

YEREVAN (News.am) — Political consultations were held on May 21 in Yerevan between the foreign ministries of Armenia and Slovenia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Armenia announced.

The parties emphasized the importance of further deepening the Armenia-Slovenia political dialogue, and discussed the possibilities and prospects of realizing the existing potential in the domains of bilateral interest.

Also, the two sides reflected on collaboration within the framework of international organizations, as well as the agenda of the dynamically developing partnership between Armenia and the European Union. Reference was made also to the latest international and regional developments and their possible security effects.

In addition, the Armenian officials presented the country's positions on the normalization of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, as well as the Crossroads of Peace project developed by the Armenian government.





# Perspectives: Iranian President’s Sudden Death Will Not Impact Tehran’s Relations with Azerbaijan

By Eldar Mamedov

Near the end of his fateful meeting with Ebrahim Raisi at the Iranian-Azerbaijani border, Azerbaijan’s president, Ilham Aliyev, touted the strength of the bilateral relationship.

“There will be many more meetings in the future,” Aliyev said, referring to his discussions with Raisi. “Iran-Azerbaijan unity and friendship is unshakable. No one can drive a wedge between us.”

There was no way that Aliyev could have known at the time that the Iranian president would be dead in a matter of hours, killed, along with others, including Iran’s foreign minister, when the helicopter they departed in crashed into a mountain not far from the meeting site. Raisi’s untimely death, however, will have little impact on the course of Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, or on Tehran’s general geopolitical approach in the South Caucasus.

The Raisi-Aliyev meeting highlighted Tehran’s and Baku’s mutual interest in improving bilateral ties. At the same time, it revealed roadblocks that continue to act as an irritant, specifically Azerbaijan’s strong strategic connection to Israel.

The two presidents traveled to the border area ostensibly to inaugurate a hydro-power facility on the Araz (Arax) River, which forms the frontier between the two countries. The facility, dubbed Giz Galasi, is the first of several such projects to start operating on the river with the dual aim of generating electricity for both countries, and facilitating irrigation for agriculture. “Such a beautiful project will increase the welfare and employment of our people and therefore will be the next step towards success,” Aliyev said in a speech at the May 19 ceremony. “I am sure that there will be many similar joint projects in the future.”

Aliyev outlined big plans for the areas just north of the Araz (Arax) River, saying that they would become key components of a “green energy” zone that includes two 280-megawatt hydropower plants. The power generated by wind, water and sun in Azerbaijan’s green zone will “benefit the entire region,” Aliyev announced.

As Aliyev repeatedly underscored in his speech, trade and economics are the drivers of the expansion of bilateral Iranian-Azerbaijani ties. Iran features prominently in Baku’s plans to serve as a key trade hub for both East-West and North-South trade.

The May 19 meeting was a significant moment for Iran and Azerbaijan, a time when both countries signaled that they had moved past the not-so-subtle rancor that had marked bilateral relations in recent years and cemented a new pragmatism in place.

The Araz River ceremony capped months of work to finalize a variety of projects relating to power generation and connectivity, and, more broadly, to reset relations. Iran viewed Azerbaijan’s reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh from 2020-23 as detrimental to its interests, given Baku’s close relationships with both Israel and Turkey. Ultimately, it appears policymakers in Tehran opted to set aside their concerns and pursue a closer relationship with Baku. While Raisi’s death may cause a behind-the-scenes succession struggle in Tehran that could have unsettling side effects in other areas, it is not expected to cause any significant change in Iran’s pragmatic approach towards Baku.

The Raisi-Aliyev meeting may have showcased mutual pragmatism, but it also provided important clues that the fun-

damental nature of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy will remain unchanged. Aliyev’s remarks on May 19 provided no indication that Azerbaijan is willing to downgrade its ties with Iran’s arch-enemy Israel.

In his speech at the Araz River ceremony, Raisi hinted at Tehran’s lingering vexation over Baku’s ties to Israel, making what can be seen as an aspirational plea for Azerbaijan to rethink the relationship.

“We would very much like to deepen cooperation in international organizations and show solidarity on some special issues, including the issue of Palestine,” Azerbaijan’s presidential website quoted Raisi as saying. “We, the people of Azerbaijan and Iran, do not hesitate in supporting the Palestinian people and the people of Gaza.”

Saeed Azimi, an observer of Iranian af-

fairs, hinted that Raisi’s comment on Gaza could also be seen as indirect criticism of Aliyev’s close relations with Israel. The depth of Iran’s concerns over Azerbaijani-Israeli ties was also seen in comments by a prominent conservative commentator,

country is seen as a lynchpin in all sorts of trade and energy networks involving the big global and regional players: the United States, European Union, China, Russia and Iran. Such a fortuitous geopolitical position gives Azerbaijan the flexibility to resist pressure exerted by any one state. Baku is willing to buck even its closest ally, Turkey, on occasion. Azerbaijan so far has resisted joining a Turkish trade embargo on Israel over the ongoing fighting in Gaza. Azeri oil bound for Israel continues to ship out of Turkish ports, according to media reports.

It seems Iran is willing to tolerate Azerbaijan’s determination to act as a geopolitical wildcard in order to achieve its goal of developing the North-South trade corridor as an economic lifeline.

(Eldar Mamedov is a Brussels-based foreign policy expert. This article originally appeared on the website [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org) on May 20.)

THE RAISI-ALIYEV MEETING HIGHLIGHTED TEHRAN’S AND BAKU’S MUTUAL INTEREST IN IMPROVING BILATERAL TIES. AT THE SAME TIME, IT REVEALED ROADBLOCKS THAT CONTINUE TO ACT AS AN IRRITANT, SPECIFICALLY AZERBAIJAN’S STRONG STRATEGIC CONNECTION TO ISRAEL.

Foad Izadi, who suggested that possible Israeli foul play should not be dismissed in the helicopter crash.

Azerbaijan appears zealously determined to preserve its strategic autonomy, taking advantage of the fact that the

## Armenia Offers Condolences to Iran, as Reports Indicate Raisi Had Canceled Planned Visit to Armenia

CONDOLENCES, from page 1

In a message to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said he is “shocked” by the deadly crash.

“On behalf of the government and the people of the Republic of Armenia, I convey to you my sincere condolences and words of consolation on the tragic death of my dear friend and colleague President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and their accompanying persons,”

and threats caused by this situation face not only Iran,” Tigran Abrahamyan, a senior lawmaker from the opposition Pativ Unem bloc, wrote on Facebook.

“At this difficult moment, all our thoughts and prayers are with the friendly state and brotherly people of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” read a statement released by an anti-government protest movement led by Armenian Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan.

Galstanyan had expressed hope that Raisi and the other Iranian officials will

woman Ani Badalyan said in a short statement to RFE/RL’s Armenian Service. She did not comment further.

Citing an unnamed “source,” Russia’s leading state news agency, TASS, reported that Raisi had been due to attend a ceremony to launch a road project in Armenia. “The visit was postponed at the last moment,” it said.

Raisi traveled on Sunday to the Azerbaijani-Iranian border where he inaugurated with Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev a dam on the Arax river separating the two countries. He was returning from that ceremony when a helicopter carrying him, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and other officials crashed in a mountainous forest in Iran’s East Azerbaijan province.

Alphanews.am quoted a spokeswoman for the Armenian Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures as saying that a joint Armenian-Iranian “event” was due to take place last week on a road leading from the Iranian border to Kajaran, a town in Armenia’s Syunik province. She did not say why it was cancelled.

Last October, the Armenian government awarded a \$215 million contract to a consortium of two Iranian companies to upgrade the 32-kilometer road over the next three years. The contract was signed in Yerevan in the presence of Iran’s Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrzad Bazrpash. The latter thus underlined its geopolitical significance for Tehran.

Azerbaijan’s September 2023 takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh raised more fears in Yerevan that Baku will also attack Armenia to open an extraterritorial land corridor to the Nakhichevan exclave through Syunik. Iran has repeatedly warned against attempts to strip it of the common border and transport links with Armenia. Raisi reportedly told a visiting Azerbaijani official in October that the corridor sought by Baku is “resolutely opposed” by his country.



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Tehran, November 1, 2022

Pashinyan said. “I express my solidarity with the government and people of the Islamic Republic of Iran, wishing strength and steadfastness at this difficult time.”

Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan reacted to the “devastating news from Iran” on X the social media platform. He offered his “deepest condolences” to the government and “friendly people” of Iran.

Underlining the cordial relations between the two neighboring states, Armenian opposition leaders issued similar statements.

“This is not only Iran’s pain, this is a tragedy in the home of a good neighbor,

survive the crash when their whereabouts are still unknown late on Sunday.

“Iran is a friendly country for us and stability in our region, to which Iran is one of the maintainers, it is very important at this juncture,” he said.

### Planned Trip to Armenia

The Armenian government on the same day neither confirmed nor denied reports that Raisi had canceled at the last minute a visit to Armenia scheduled for Sunday, the day that he died in a helicopter crash.

“Information is officially given about confirmed visits of high-ranking officials to Armenia,” Foreign Ministry spokes-





# Community News

## \$2K Offered for Information on Armenian Cemetery Arsons in Fresno

By Jason Takhtadjan

FRESNO, Calif. (KSEE/KGPE) — A cash incentive is being offered to anyone from the public with any information regarding the recent arsons at the Ararat Armenian Cemetery.

The Fresno police and fire departments announced that they were unable to catch the person responsible for burning a tree at the Ararat Armenian cemetery on Sunday, April 21.

“There was actually two police officers on the scene investigating a separate matter. They responded quickly, about 15 police officers on the perimeter, and CHP assisted us with their police helicopter. Unfortunately, although we were very close, we were not able to apprehend the suspect in this case,” Chief of Police Paco Balderrama said.

A \$2,000 award is now available for anyone with information that will assist in an arrest connected to this year’s arsons.

“We need to find out who is setting these fires. We need to apprehend this person. We need to keep the commu-



Ararat Armenian Cemetery in Fresno after the arson

nity safe,” Chief Balderrama said.

According to the Chief of Police, Fresno Fire has responded to 11 fires at the cemetery involving trees since Jan. 13, 2024.

“Approximately 30 trees have been damaged and 20 of these incidents have occurred at the Ararat Armenian Cemetery at least on their property,” Fire Chief Billy Alcorn said.

Deputy Fire Marshal Jay Tracy says there is no evidence of a hate crime, given these recent arsons have happened during Armenian Heritage Month and nearby Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.

“We don’t have a suspect, and without a suspect, we do always keep that avenue open, but at this point, we have nothing that would lead us to believe there is any sort of a hate crime,” Deputy Fire Marshal Jay Tracy said.

Anyone with any information that would lead to an arrest in any arson cases involving the cemetery is asked to contact Valley Crime Stoppers at 559-498-7867.



Ronald Suny shows a movie poster of his family held by Vicken Mouradian.

## Commemorating Genocide Through ‘Shared Memories’ At University of Michigan

By Vicken Mouradian

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — About 80 individuals, including students, faculty and community members, gathered on April 24 for a special event titled “Shared Memories: The Armenian Experience Through Objects and Stories.” Hosted by the University of Michigan’s Center for Armenian Studies (CAS) and the Armenian Students Cultural Association (ASCA), this event aimed to commemorate the anniversary of the 1915 Armenian Genocide in a unique and interactive manner.

The event marked the Center for Armenian Studies’ second annual community commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in this forum. Attendees were encouraged to bring objects and share stories that reflected the Armenian identity or experience. The atmosphere was filled with music, meaningful conversations, and traditional Armenian foods, creating a sense of camaraderie and connection. Highlighting the importance of departing from traditional approaches to genocide commemorations like lectures or vigils, “Shared Memories” aimed to unite the vibrant Armenian community in a more inclusive and uplifting manner.



Attendees from the Armenian Students Cultural Association

experiences of the Armenian community. One participant, Rackham student Arakel Minassian, shared a portrait of his grandmother who lived through the Armenian Genocide and the Nazi occupation of Greece during World War II. For Minassian, the event provided an essential opportunity to share his family’s stories and honor the resilience of Armenian diaspora communities.

Many presentations focused on retelling family stories, particularly those of individuals who lived during and after the 1915 genocide. These narratives emphasized the importance of family, life, and the preservation of culture. Professor Emeritus Ron Suny, reflecting on the event, emphasized its significance in building a sense of community among Armenian descendants. Beyond commemorating the genocide, “Shared Memories” allowed attendees to share their families’ stories and experiences, fostering a deeper connection within the Armenian community.



“Shared Memories” introductory remarks by CAS Director Gottfried Hagen

## Alexis Ohanian Makes an Unprecedented Investment in Women’s Track

By Adam Kilgore

NEW YORK (*Washington Post*) — Alexis Ohanian, the billionaire co-founder of Reddit and husband of Serena Williams, had some questions for one of the fastest female sprinters in the world.

Already a co-owner of a professional women’s soccer franchise, Ohanian developed a sudden curiosity in women’s track and field last year. He reached out to Gabby Thomas, an Olympic medalist who figures to be one of the faces of the Paris Games this summer, and picked her brain.

“Can the track be laid out like an F-1 circuit, so it’s not like an oval every time?” Ohanian asked at one point.

In Ohanian’s recollection, Thomas replied, “That’s a terrible idea.”

Ohanian and Thomas kept talking, and his interest in women’s track and field led to a stage inside Chelsea Factory on Tuesday afternoon at the Business of Women’s Sports Summit. Seated next to Thomas, Ohanian announced an unprecedented investment in women’s track and field.

In late September, about a month after the Paris Olympics, Ohanian’s venture capital firm Seven Seven Six will host the 776 Invitational, a meet with the largest prize pool on record for a women-only track event.

Athletes from the United States and abroad will compete for a total purse of at least \$500,000, with \$60,000 going to first place, \$25,000 for second and \$10,000 for third in a yet-to-be determined number of events. It is richer than most events on the professional circuit, men’s or women’s; gold medalists at last year’s world championships earned \$70,000.

In 2019, Ohanian deemed women’s soccer an undervalued business opportunity and, through Seven Seven Six, started the NWSL franchise Angel City in Los Angeles. He views women’s track and field similarly: not as a cause, but a business opportunity.

“I never want it to be misconstrued as, ‘Oh, it’s because he’s a girl-dad or it’s because he’s Serena’s husband or it’s for charity,’” Ohanian said. “No, that’s what’s held this s--- back. First and foremost, I’m here because I think it is great, and I invest in greatness. If it just so happens it inspires a generation of young girls, awesome. I want to keep investing across all these elements of sport, and the women’s game continues to be where there’s tremendous upside.”

The invitational’s location has not been finalized, although Ohanian said he has a venue in mind and that it will not be Hayward Field in Eugene, Ore., which has hosted nearly every major U.S. track and field event in recent years, including the 2022 world

see OHANIAN, page 8





## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Alexis Ohanian Makes an Unprecedented Investment in Women's Track

OHANIAN, from page 7  
championships and the U.S. Olympic trials.

Ohanian's entry into track and field offers promise for a sport that struggles to gain traction in America outside of the Olympics every four years. For now, he is limiting his investment to only women's events.

"I suspect there will be some people who will be a little upset on the internet that the biggest prize ever is going to a women's-only event," Ohanian said. "But I'm okay with that."

Ohanian's interest in track and field began when he watched an interview with sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson, who won the 100 meters at the 2021 U.S. Olympic trials before a failed marijuana test led to a suspension that prevented her from competing in Tokyo. Richardson shared that she had learned her biological mother died shortly before competing, which led her to self-medicate. The story resonated with Ohanian, whose own mother died while he was starting Reddit.

"In that moment, I felt like, wow, I can really empathize with this person," Ohanian said. "I was like, she can smoke all the weed she wants. She was dealing with some serious s---. I instantly decided that day. I was like, 'I'm a fan.'"

Ohanian immersed himself in track and field's online culture. He viewed track as "an elegant, simple, amazing" sport that was easy to follow and exciting to watch.

"At some point, I was like, wait, this is just like women's soccer," Ohanian said. "I was like, 'How is this is a sport people only care about in America once every four years?' It doesn't make sense.'"

Ohanian got Thomas's email from soccer player Midge Purce, about whom

Ohanian's company is producing a documentary. Purce overlapped with Thomas at Harvard. As he considered his own event, Ohanian viewed Thomas as "just a perfect partner to launch with."

Thomas became a global track and field star at the 2021 U.S. Olympic trials, win-

ning the 200 meters in a stunning 21.61 seconds, then the second-fastest time ever at the distance. She won a bronze medal in the 200 meters in Tokyo and a silver in the 4x100 relay. At last year's world championships in Budapest, having missed the 2022 worlds because of a torn hamstring,

Thomas won silver in the 200 and gold in the relay. Thomas has not won an individual gold at a major global meet, yet she will enter the U.S. Olympic trials in June and — most likely — the Paris Olympics as one of the biggest stars on the U.S. team.

backtracked" when it signed a U.S. rights deal with FloTrack, an obscure streaming service that will charge viewers far more than previous broadcast partner Peacock. She also called for USA Track & Field to consider more diverse and easier-to-reach venues than Oregon for major events.

"I'm so excited to see what we can do with track and field," Thomas said Tuesday. "I have such high hopes for our sport. I think we have something special here."

Seven Seven Six has plans to broadcast the event but did not share them. Ohanian envisions a party atmosphere at the one-day event, with an infield crowded with fans, a musical act providing entertainment between races and a disc jockey beat-dropping the second runners cross the finish line. "Bring the energy of almost like a Coachella," Ohanian said.

Ohanian has no solidified plans beyond September's invitational, but he did not dismiss the idea of eventually starting a league or tour.

"I'm not a small thinker," Ohanian said. "We're trying to be ambitious here, but one at a time. If this goes as well as I think it will, and folks show up

and show out the way I know they will, this won't be the last. If folks show up like I think they will, [a league or a tour] sounds like a great idea."

(This article originally ran in the *Washington Post* on April 23.)



Olympic sprinter Gabby Thomas speaks during a conversation with Alexis Ohanian, Principal Owner, Angel City Football Club & Los Angeles Golf Club, during the Business of Women Sport Summit in New York on Tuesday. (Elsa/Getty Images)



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## THE ARMENIAN MIRROR SPECTATOR

### Armenian Mirror-Spectator Seeks Summer Intern

The *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* is seeking an intern for a six-week program this summer (mid-July through August).

The intern will receive a \$150 weekly stipend provided through the Armenian Students' Association of America's Internship Program.

The intern should be in college or graduate school and does not necessarily have to be studying journalism. Most likely, the internship will be done long distance, via electronic communications, therefore location is not an issue (but native speaker knowledge of English remains important). Main tasks will be writing and working on the *Mirror* website, but they could also take part in marketing campaigns and work to increase digital advertising.

The *Mirror* also is looking for interns during the regular year.

If interested, please email a resume and cover letter to either [tcadirector@aol.com](mailto:tcadirector@aol.com) and [alin.gregorian@gmail.com](mailto:alin.gregorian@gmail.com).





## COMMUNITY NEWS / OBITUARY

# Myron and Carol Boyajian Fine Arts Scholarships Available

CHICAGO — The Myron and Carol Boyajian Fine Arts Scholarship committee will award two \$1,000 scholarships in 2024 to two students of Armenian heritage, having at least one Armenian parent or grandparent.

Previous awardees are Alex Koceyan, now a student at the Detroit School of Fine Arts in Detroit, and Tatevik Kocharyan, who is in a Master's Degree program at the Longy School of Music, in Cambridge, Mass.

The scholarship was created by Myron Boyajian in honor of his wife, Carol, who passed away in March 2021 after a valiant 9-year fight against GIST cancer. The idea, according to him, is to "pay it forward."

Carol herself began her college career with a scholarship to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) with academics at the University of Chicago (UoC). Graduating from high school as an awarded student artist, Carol was unable to afford college, and considered joining the Army or Navy to gain an education later on the GI Bill. Her high school

art teacher told her to register at the Art Institute and that "things would be taken care of." Carol never learned the name of her benefactor, but rewarded that confidence by hard work in the arts and her academics. She was granted a full four-year scholarship to SAIC and the UoC after one semester of school. After Carol graduated (with high faculty honors.

Carol occasionally produced abstract works, but her favorite style was representational art. Boyajian's work can be found in many private and corporate collections. Several pieces of her equine art were selected for the corporate offices of the National Jockey Club, while the Western States Blast Furnace & Coke Oven Association commissioned eight portraits of outgoing presidents and officers, and her commissioned portrait of the Esposito brothers is in the collection of the Hockey Hall of Fame. She was commissioned to provide portraits of the present and former pastors of the Resurrection Lutheran Church of Oak Forest, Ill.

Carol Boyajian had produced many other commissioned works of original art, especially equine and western art, and animal and botanical subjects, as well as portraits. Notably, an animal painting was commissioned for the cover of the prestigious, peer-reviewed, internationally published journal, *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta-Biomembranes*, August 2009. Boyajian's painting depicted various organic molecular structures surrounding an amphibian used in medical research. The original painting is now in a collection at the Department of Biochemical Science of the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

Carol enjoyed sports and trained vigorously to become an elite, competitive bicycle racer from her mid-30s. Often competing against younger women in some bicycle races, Carol became a multi-time Illinois state champion (both road and track) and in 1984, the Veteran Women's U.S. National Criterium Champion), Carol brought that same competitive fire and zeal into her work and

relished challenges in virtually all media and subjects.

Boyajian was a Certified Illinois art teacher (K-12) and fine artist who loved teaching. She was an Adult Education instructor for Chicago Vocational High School, the Home-wood-Flossmoor High School, the Home-wood-Flossmoor Park District, Rich Township Senior Services, and the Tall Grass Arts Association Art School.

The merit-based scholarships will be awarded to students who have achieved high honors in their area of graphic arts, music, and the written word. Consideration will be given to the student's artistic accomplishments, artistic talents and community involvement.

Submit applications to: Father Tavit Boyajian (no relation) Saints Joachim and Anne Armenian Apostolic Church, 12600 South Ridgeland Ave., Palos Heights, IL 60463 or at [robert@stsjoachimandanne.ccsend.com](mailto:robert@stsjoachimandanne.ccsend.com). Candidates will be selected by a committee of Church and Diocese clergymen.

## OBITUARY

### Thomas T. Amirian Jr.

#### Dedicated to Music

BROOKLINE, Mass. — Thomas T. Amirian Jr., of Brookline, died on May 16. He was 81.

He was the son of the late Thomas T. Amirian Sr. and Marguerite (Norian) Amirian and brother of Adrienne Amirian.

Tom was born in Boston, but the family moved from a one room apartment to a 10-room house in Brookline when he was a toddler. He started taking piano lessons from Gladys Ondreck when he was 6, was awarded a Paderewski gold medal in piano performance when he was 17. He performed with the Brookline High School orchestra where he made lifelong fond memories.

Tom also sang in the choir at Trinity Church in Copley Square from the age of 8 when his mother introduced him to the boys choir. When his voice started to change he sang in the adult choir until he was 23. The rich musical program of that church influenced him profoundly and in college he studied music theory and composition and took up the organ, which he became proficient at, taking classes at Boston University and New England Conservatory.

Tom was also interested in radio programming, and went to the Northeast Broadcasting School after attending Boston University and the New England Conservatory.

After his college years, Tom worked in his father's consulting engineering office until his father closed his office to take a job in Maine where construction was booming. Tom worked as a church organist for a while. He sang in the choir of the Saint James Armenian Church under Dr. Arra Avakian for a while, and in the Erevan Choral Society for a few years under the direction of the Very Rev. Oshagan Minassian.

Tom's many interests filled his free time. He was an avid photographer. He made friends in the film world. He discovered international folk dancing, to which he introduced his sister. He was introduced to Boston Symphony Orchestra performances by his piano teacher, who took him to hear a violin solo performance by her sister, Ruth Posselt. After that, he became a regular, starting with open rehearsals, then progressing to becoming a season ticket holder up to his death. He went in-person on Thursdays, and recorded Saturday broadcasts.

Tom's love of music was broad, and he amassed an amazing collection of records and CDs.

In his later years, he was his mother's primary caretaker, starting when she was 94 until her passing at the age of 100.

Tom's own health declined suddenly in September 2023. He had an operation,

after which he needed rehabilitation, and nursing care which he received at Belmont Manor in Belmont.

He will be missed by his sister, who was with him almost every evening at the nursing home, and his many cousins.

Funeral services were at Saint James Armenian Church, Watertown on Thursday, May 23.

In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be made to the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research, 395 Concord Ave, Belmont, MA 02478, the Armenian Students Association, 333 Atlantic Ave, Warwick, R.I. 02828, or Saint James Armenian Church, 465 Mount Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472.

Burial will be at the Mount Auburn Cemetery in the family plot, Cambridge.

Arrangements were made by the Aram Bedrosian Funeral Home.



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### Sona (Kalemderian) Manjikian

BELMONT, Mass. — Sona (Kalemderian) Manjikian of Belmont, 90, died on May 4, 2024.

She was the wife of the late Serop; mother of Raffi Manjikian and his wife Laurie, Ara Manjikian and his wife Mary and Taleen Donoian and her husband Stephen; grandmother of Haig, Lucine, Sara, Rubina, Raffi, David, Christian, Alina and Stefan and sister of Maro Megeurditchian and her husband Dicran.

Funeral service was at St. Stephen's Armenian Church, Watertown on Monday, May 20.

In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be made to the Saint Stephen's Armenian Church or the Hairenik Assoc., 80 Bigelow Ave., Watertown, MA 02472. Interment at Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge.

Arrangements were made by the Aram Bedrosian Funeral Home.





## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Diocesan Assembly Banquet Honors Service and Advocacy

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — The 2024 Diocesan Assembly Awards Banquet was the culmination of a weekend of forward-looking optimism for the future.

The host parish, St. Mark Church, ensured that the banquet was an elegant stage on which to honor church leaders for their contributions to the life of the Eastern Diocese.

Diocesan Legate Archbishop Vicken Aykazian delivered the invocation. Words of welcome were given by parish council chair David Jermakian. Diocesan Assembly chair Diran Jebejian offered a toast, and Kristen Fraser served as Mistress of Ceremonies.

The artists for the evening were violinist Samvel Arakelyan and pianist Nikki Stoia, who performed two sets of classical, contemporary, and Armenian pieces.

Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan took the occasion to present three Springfield parish leaders — Anna Garabedian, David Jermakian and Steve Omartian — with the Diocese's "St. Vartan Award."

Before Bishop Mesrop presented the evening's main awards to the two honorees, each was given a special introduction outlining their distinguished backgrounds.

Fr. Hovsep Karapetyan, pastor of St. Mary Church in Washington, DC, and a member of the Diocesan Council, introduced the 2024 "Friend of the Armenians" award recipient the Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon, describing her leadership of the ecumenical organization Churches for Middle East Peace, and her outspoken advocacy for Armenian causes.

In receiving her award, Cannon gave enthusiastic remarks recalling her visits to Armenia on delegations led by Aykazian, and the deep spiritual feeling she found in the church histories of Armenian saints like Hripsime and Gayane.

She noted the extensive connections she had made to individual Armenians and to Armenian causes over the course of her ministry, especially to the cause of peace in Artsakh. And she concluded by inviting all the listeners to support peace today in the Middle East and every desperate locale in the world.

To introduce the "Armenian Church Member of the Year," Aykazian took to the podium to offer admiring reflections on the 65-year ministry of the Rev. Mampre Kouzouian, this year's award recipient.

He was followed by Rev. Kouzouian's son, Fr. Vasken Kouzouian (pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, Mass.), who offered recollections extolling his father's seven decades of service to the Armenian Church. In addition, Kevork Atinizian II spoke tenderly about growing up under his father's pastoral guidance.

When it came time for Fr. Mampre Kouzouian to speak, he implored listeners to realize that "the church is your home—it belongs to you."

"I have served my Lord Jesus Christ for 66 years as a priest, and before that as a child and teacher," he said. "What you give to Him, you will receive back."

"God will repay you from His heart for what you give to Him," said Rev. Mampre Kouzouian, as he gave tearful words of thanks to the crowd.

To conclude the program, St. Mark's pastor, Fr. Nigoghos Aznavourian, spoke graciously with words of thanks for Parsamyan, the parish committee, parishioners, and his wife Yn. Julianne. He also thanked his predecessor as pastor in Springfield, who started the preparations for the Diocesan Assembly, Fr. Sevak Gabrielyan.

At last, the bishop offered his own words of gratitude and blessing on the honorees and the banquet attendees.

St. Mark's Diocesan Assembly organizing committee, under the leadership of

pastor Fr. Nigoghos Aznavourian and the parish council, included David Jermakian (parish council and hotel chair), Dale Diefenderfer (audio-visual co-chair), Talene Jermakian (banquet chair), Elaine Devine (registration chair), Senay Asik (clergy conference chair), Ani Jermakian (hospitality chair), Diane Boghosian (Wednesday dinner chair), Andy Fraser (transportation chair), Aroxy Meregian (Sunday brunch chair), Anna Garabedian (sponsorship chair), Jeri Humphries and Sue Elmasian (treasurers), and some 50 parishioner volunteers—all of whom contributed to a pleasant and hospitable weekend.

## Diocesan Award Winners

Every year the Eastern Diocese bestows its "Friend of the Armenians" and "Armenian Church Member of the Year" awards to express gratitude to people who have profoundly benefited the church; to deepen existing relationships with important figures in the community; and to strengthen the honorees in their continuing efforts.

This year's "Armenian Church Member of the Year," the Rev. Fr. Mampre Kouzouian, has served the church as a priest for 66 years, linking us to some of the great figures and events of the past, and standing as an inspirational example for the future.

Young Alexan Kouzouian embraced his

1960s and marched in solidarity against poverty and racism as a member of the National Council of Churches Governing Board. Archbishop Manoogian later appointed Fr. Mampre the Canon Sacrist of St. Vartan Cathedral, pastor of St. Gregory the Illuminator Church, and Diocesan Director of Ecumenical Relations.

Fr. Mampre led the Holy Trinity Armenian Church of Greater Boston from 1977 until his retirement in 2001. Reflecting on his years at Holy Trinity, he said: "The church is a part of a world that is rapidly changing. While the foundation of the church is unchanged, the application of what we do changes. Social, moral, and ethical issues need our attention. People want to know where the church stands on such issues. We must provide answers and give guidance, as well as explore the ways we can remain faithful in a rapidly changing world to an unchanging Christ."

During his pastorate at Holy Trinity Church, Der Mampre spearheaded numerous projects that greatly improved the church complex and addressed future needs of the community. Under his leadership, the parish hosted a Diocesan Assembly in 1988, and welcomed countless dignitaries and church leaders, including two Catholicos and a future Catholicos; United States

as the homeless in the Vagharshapat region surrounding Holy Echmiadzin. "During my visit to the Muratsan Children's Cancer Clinic, innocent young children living with cancer, without their hair because of their treatment, were with their parents on their routine visits. The children were in pain, suffering from this cancerous disease. I couldn't stand it. After I said my prayers on each child, I came out of their rooms and cried like a child. I couldn't accept what I saw. These children are God's gifts to their parents, to our Nation, to our Motherland, and to our churches."

He continued: "During that stay, I also went to visit homeless individuals and families. There were young children with one or both parents living in run-down, vacant buildings without water, electricity or bathrooms. For me, it was totally unacceptable to see human beings living in these conditions. Here too, I cried like a child feeling so sorry for our own people living in these conditions."

He was so profoundly affected by these two powerful experiences that he decided that gifts made to him on the 60th anniversary of his ordination would go to support both the cancer-stricken children at the Muratsan Children's Cancer Clinic and the homeless of the Vagharshapat region. Throughout his 60 years of service to the church, Fr. Mampre Kouzouian has traveled extensively on behalf of the Eastern Diocese and has received many great honors and recognitions from Armenian and other church leaders.

With his late wife, Yeretzgin Nuvart (d. 2007), he had three children, Susan, Joyce, and Fr. Vasken, and their families.

The 2024 "Friend of the Armenians," the Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon, is the executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), and an author, speaker, advocate, and academic historian who has written extensively about global poverty, racial justice, and the Middle East.

As the executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace, Rev. Cannon works diligently to educate both herself and others on the ongoing conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijan, including the displacement of more than 130k refugees from Nagorno/Karabakh. Under her leadership, CMEP has hosted several educational webinars educating U.S. Christians on the conflict and how they can engage in ways that promote peace and justice. The most recent was a mini-course called "Armenia at War: The Survival of the Church in the Oldest Christian State." Part I panelists included Lenna V. Hovanesian and Amb. John M. Evans former U.S. Ambassador to Armenia from 2004-2006. Carla Khijoyan, the Program Executive for the Middle East at the World Council of Churches, and Sonya Nersessian, an attorney, spoke about Artsakh and its historical and present-day significance to Armenians during the second session.

In September 2022, Cannon led a delegation of leaders from Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) to Armenia at the invitation of CMEP board representative Archbishop Vicken Aykazian. Their travels coincided with the bombings along the border between Armenia and Nagorno/Karabakh that week. The group had the privilege of meeting with His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. In addition, Cannon and the delegation met with Christian leaders, Armenian government officials, and others to learn about the realities affecting displaced communities from Artsakh and to advocate on behalf of the sustainability of the Christian community, cultural heritage, and democracy in Armenia and the surrounding region.

*continued on next page*



Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, left, presents Rev. Mampre Kouzouian with the 2024 "Armenian Church Member of the Year," during the 122nd Diocesan Assembly Banquet in Springfield, MA (photo: Mano Baghjejian)

calling at the age of 16, entering the Armenian Theological Seminary in Antelias, Lebanon. After graduating in 1954, he served for two years as principal of a local Armenian school in Basrah, Iraq.

In 1956, he arrived in New York to further his theological education at the General Theological Seminary. He reflects that as his individual history comes to life through the singing of the Divine Liturgy, so does the spiritual history of Armenia. "The theology of the Armenian Church is in the hymnal book. Our history, heroes, generals, saints, and our people are all venerated in our hymns. Whatever has happened through the centuries comes alive through every clergyman each Sunday. We are the inheritors of our past culture, a culture we must preserve for future generations."

In February 1958 he was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Mampre Calafayan. As an honor for the young priest, the Primate gave him his own name. Fr. Mampre's first pastoral assignment was St. Mary's Armenian Church in Irvington (now Livingston), NJ. His early years as a priest were distinguished by his active involvement in the civil rights movement. As a forerunner among church leaders in this movement, Father Mampre, along with the Primate, Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, traveled to Washington, DC, in the early

senators and governors; and renowned academics and speakers.

Fr. Mampre said, on his 40th anniversary: "I set out to be a priest in the image of Christ, to express the will of our Heavenly Father, to serve people, to give hope to people, to encourage people, and to be His ambassador. I don't think I've deviated from this. If anything has changed, my feelings of service have grown. I believe in more service to the Christian community and to my parishioners. Reaching out and serving people is a joy."

During his retirement he served as visiting priest to several Armenian churches, including those in Chelmsford, Boca Raton, Orlando, Springfield, Charlotte, and Niagara Falls. These visits continued to fulfill his passion for ministering to those faithful most in need of his pastoral outreach, namely the elderly, sick and lonely.

In May 2017, Fr. Mampre was invited by Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II, to visit the Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin and share his lifetime of pastoral ministry experience with the seminarians at the Gevorkian Seminary. He discovered two causes that became very close to his heart: the children at the Muratsan Chemotherapy Clinic of Yerevan State Medical University—a pediatric oncology clinic that treats children from all over Armenia—as well





## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Diocesan Clergy Gather in Springfield for 2024 Conference

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — The annual Clergy Conference of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America was held April 30 to May 2, 2024, in Springfield, MA, as part of the 122nd Diocesan Assembly hosted by the city's St. Mark Church. Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan presided over the gathering, with nearly the entire complement of active pastors from the Eastern Diocese in attendance, alongside several clergy in retirement.

It was Bishop Mesrop's second such conference since his election as Primate, and the first since his consecration as a bishop of the church.

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian, the Diocesan Legate and Ecumenical Director, Diocesan Vicar Fr. Simeon Odabashian, and two guests from the Mother See, Very Rev. Ruben Zargaryan and Very Rev. Harutiun Kirakosyan, also attended.

Fr. Mesrop Hovsepyan served as conference chairman, with Fr. Paren Galstyan as vice chairman, and Fr. Guregh Hambardzumyan and Fr. Avedis Kalayjian as the Armenian and English secretaries, respectively. Host parish pastor Fr. Nigoghos Aznavourian welcomed the participants.

A paternal blessing from Karekin II, the Catholicos of All Armenians, was read to the clergy, commending the work they do for the Armenian Church. His Holiness drew attention to the urgent security challenges currently faced by our homeland; encouraged active church participation throughout the Diocese; and called on pastors to serve as role models among their parishioners.

The Primate expressed hope that the Armenian people will emerge from their present difficulties. He reviewed the previous year's celebration of the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese, and also gave an update on the ongoing work to restore St. Vartan Cathedral in New York. He



The annual Clergy Conference of the Eastern Diocese was held April 30 to May 2, 2024, in Springfield, MA, as part of the 122nd Diocesan Assembly hosted by the city's St. Mark Church. Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan presided.

described his vigorous schedule of parish visits through the year, and looked forward with hope to a church consecration and a priestly ordination in the coming months.

Bishop Mesrop also reported to the clergy on progress made during the past year, regarding the Diocesan "action plan" introduced at last year's Diocesan Assembly titled, "Growing In Faith Together." Beyond these vital practical matters, however, the heart of the Primate's message to the clergy was pastoral, revolving around the themes of spiritual renewal and witnessing to the Christian faith.

## Presentations and Discussions

Fr. Krikor Sabounjian and Fr. Mardiros Chevian, Dean of St. Nersess Seminary,

spoke on the urgent need to identify those with the vocational calling to serve God and the church, who would be potential seminarians.

Archbishop Aykazian spoke about the ecumenical, interfaith, and global work in which he has been involved. He also cautioned the clergy about the desperate reality of the persecution facing Armenians and other Christians in the Middle East and Jerusalem.

Fr. Hratch Sargsyan, the Diocese's Interim Director of Ministries, shared some of the work that is being conducted at the Diocese, highlighting the Vemkar digital ministries platform; new publications and tools for the educational purpose of the parishes; youth and camp programs; and

music ministry.

In the course of the conference, clergy heard reflections on the Continuing Education Program at Holy chmiadzin; learned about federal grants available for enhancing church security; were briefed on a pending U.S. Senate resolution safeguarding Armenia; and heard a report on the programs of the Fund for Armenian Relief and its crowdsourcing platform "Ayo!"

The Clergy Conference concluded on Thursday, May 2, with the Holy Badarak at St. Mark Church, celebrated by Fr. Ruben Zargaryan of Holy Etchmiadzin. Brother clergy sang under the direction of Dn. Rubik Mailian. A requiem service for the departed clergy of the Eastern Diocese was offered at the end of the liturgy.

from previous page

Cannon has also spent significant time with the Armenian community in Beirut and has been mentored by Rev. Dr. Gilbert Bilizekian, former president of Haigazian University. In January 2024, she returned with an executive leadership delegation of pastors and leaders to Beirut and spent time with Rev. Dr. Paul Haidostian, learning about the significant impact of the Armenian community in Beirut and throughout Lebanon.

She received her first doctorate in American History with a minor in Middle Eastern studies at the University of California (Davis), focusing on the history of the American



Receiving the 2024 "Friend of the Armenians" Award is the Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon, executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP). Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan presented the award during the 122nd Diocesan Assembly Banquet in Springfield, MA. (Photo: Mano Baghjejian)

Protestant church in Israel and Palestine, and her second doctorate in Ministry in Spiritual Formation from Northern Theological Seminary. Rev. Cannon holds an M.B.A. from North Park University's School of Business and Nonprofit Management, and an M.A. in bioethics from Trinity International University, and an M.Div. from North Park Theological Seminary. Cannon completed her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Chicago in History, Philosophy, Social Studies, of Science and Medicine.

She is the author of *Beyond Hashtag Activism*; co-editor of *Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice*; editor of *A Land Full of God: Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land*; author of *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*, and *Just Spirituality: How Faith Practices Fuel Social Action*; and co-author of *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*.

Her work has been highlighted in *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christianity Today*, *Leadership Magazine*, *Newsweek* and other international media outlets. She was the recipient of the North Park Theological Seminary Alumni Award for 2024.

Cannon is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). Her professional background includes serving as the Senior Director of Advocacy and Outreach for World Vision-US, the executive pastor of Hillside Covenant Church (Walnut Creek, California), Director of Development and Transformation for Extension Ministries at Willow Creek Community Church (Barrington, Illinois), and as a consultant to the Middle East for child advocacy issues for Compassion International.

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# Arts & Culture

## Peter Jackson and Andy Serkis to Work on New Lord of the Rings Film

By Andrew Pulver

LONDON (*Guardian*) — Peter Jackson and Andy Serkis are working on a new Lord of the Rings film due to release in 2026, it has been announced.

In a statement, Warner Bros said that the first of a new set of “Lord of the Rings” films, “The Hunt for Gollum,” will be directed by and star Serkis, and be produced by Jackson.

(Serkis has an English mother and an Iraqi-Armenian father. He was born in London.)

David Zaslav, CEO of Warner Bros Discovery, had earlier told a conference call with investors that the film is “now in the early stages of script development” and that Jackson, along with writing partners Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, “will be involved every step of the way.” The film, he said, would “explore storylines yet to be told.”

Zaslav added: “Lord of the Rings is one of the most successful and revered franchises in history and presents a significant opportunity for theatrical business.”

In the statement, Jackson, Walsh and Boyens said: “It is an honour and a privilege to travel back to Middle-earth with our good friend and collaborator, Andy Serkis, who has unfinished business with that stinker – Gollum!”

Serkis added: “Yesssss, Precious. The time has come once more to venture into the unknown with my dear friends, the extraordinary and incomparable guardians of Middle-earth, Peter, Fran and Philippa ... it’s just all too delicious ...”

Warner Bros’ plans to return to Lord of the Rings emerged in February 2023, when Zaslav revealed the studio had made an agreement for “multiple” films based on JRR Tolkien’s original books with Embracer Group, the Swedish gaming company that owns most Tolkien rights after purchasing holding company Middle-earth Enterprises in 2022.

At the time Jackson, Walsh and Boyens indicated their willingness to get involved, saying: “We look forward to speaking with [Warner Bros] further to hear their vision for the franchise moving forward.”

The arrangement is a separate enterprise from Rings of Power, the Amazon-produced prequel to Lord of the Rings that debuted in August 2022, as Middle-earth Enterprises did not hold rights to TV series adaptations of more than eight episodes, and Amazon secured rights from the Tolkien estate directly.

Warner Bros is also producing The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim, an animated prequel to the trilogy, directed by Kenji Kamiyama and featuring the voices of Brian Cox and Miranda Otto, which is due for release in December 2024.

Peter Jackson’s live action trilogy was released between 2001 and 2003, earning more than \$2.9 billion worldwide and winning 17 Academy Awards, including best picture for final instalment “The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King.”



“Never Forget” featuring Aurora Mardiganian, by Myra Roberts

## Couple Seeks New Home For Painting that Captures Genocide Tragedy, Triumph

By Alin K. Gregorian

Mirror-Spectator Staff

BOSTON — Art and a painful history are intertwined in a painting that southeastern artist Myra Roberts did of Aurora Mardiganian, the noted survivor of the Armenian Genocide. The work was commissioned in 2018 by Laura and Steve Avakian, then based in Sanibel, Fla.

Now, the Avakians, back in Massachusetts, are looking for a good home for the painting, titled “Never Forget,” as they are downsizing.

In a recent interview, Laura Avakian, who had worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before retiring in 2006, said the couple realized that they would rather donate the painting to a deserving Armenian organization rather than to keep it.

As Laura Avakian recalled, she and her husband were approached in Sanibel to be sponsors for an exhibit by Roberts, titled “Spokeswomen,” highlighting her works depicting accomplished, world-famous women, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Michelle Obama and Greta Thunberg. The couple started talking to Roberts about the Armenian Genocide and wondered if she could do a painting on it.

“We wanted to commemorate and honor his [Steve’s] heritage,” Laura Avakian said.

Laura Avakian recalled that Roberts was intrigued and agreed to take on the commission. She delved deep into the subject and landed on Aurora Mardiganian as a subject, with the background featuring Steve Avakian grandparents marching through the desert during the Genocide.

“Steve and I knew nothing about her [Mardiganian],” she recalled. “She was clearly an inspirational figure.”

The painting, Laura Avakian said, “helps remind people of this tragic story and celebrates survivors.” The work, estimated to be worth \$20,000, measures 30 inches by 40 inches.

Steve Avakian was born in New York City in 1945 to immigrant parents. Three of his grandparents died during the Genocide. Yervant, his father, at age 9 marched in the desert with his mother and three siblings to Lebanon. In his 20s, Yervant found his way to the US and in New York City, met the woman who would later become his wife, Acabie. Acabie had come to the US in her teens, having been sent to an American-sponsored orphanage in Kharput with her sister in 1915.

His aunt, Elizabeth Caramen Payne, wrote a book on the family’s history, titled *Daughter of the Euphrates*, which was published by Harper in 1939. It is a detailed portrayal of the family’s village life in Habousie before and after the invasion by Turkish militants, and the orphanage where the sisters were sent after the slaughter of their parents.

Steve Avakian served as John Glenn’s personal aide during his successful 1980 US Senate campaign and went with the Senator to Washington as his press secretary. He went back to Ohio in 1985 to manage Glenn’s successful re-election campaign, winning all 88 counties.

After the election Avakian opened up his own consulting firm, which he ran for 31 years. He frequently worked with the school districts in Ohio, helping them get tax levies passed to fund infrastructure projects.

Organizations, including universities, are encouraged to write to Laura Avakian at avakianpainting@gmail.com by the end of June, if they would like to obtain the painting, at no cost. According to her, the couple will pick up the shipping tab for the painting, as well. They hope to give the painting a good home where it can generate discussion and honor a painful past.

## Work by Composer Mary Kouyoumdjian Pulitzer Finalist

NEW YORK — A work by composer Mary Kouyoumdjian was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize earlier this month. The work, “Paper Pianos,” a music-theatre hybrid, was described by the prize committee as a “socially urgent multimedia work that boldly melds music and audio documentary with first-person stories of refugees, exploring how music serves as solace and inspiration under conditions of displacement.”

“Paper Pianos” was specifically recognized by the prize committee for its music, which was composed by Mary Kouyoumdjian, a composer and documentarian with projects ranging from concert works to multimedia collaborations and film scores.

The Pulitzer Prize for Music went to Adagio (For Wadada Leo Smith), by Tyshawn Sorey.

Premiered at EMPAC (Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), Troy, N.Y. on February 25, 2023, “Paper Pianos” is a socially urgent multi-media work that boldly melds music and audio documentary with first-person stories of refugees, exploring how music serves as solace and inspiration under conditions of displacement.

The piece combines narratives from four refugees and resettlement workers: the Afghan pianist Milad Yousufi, Getachew Bashir (Ethiopia), Hani Ali (Somalia) and Akil Aljaysh (Iraq). Recordings of the protagonists from interviews conducted by creators Mary Kouyoumdjian (composer) and Nigel Maister (text and staging) are incorporated with the intricate hand-drawn animations of visual artist Kevork Mourad to vividly depict the dramatic emotional landscape of displacement and resettlement experienced by refugees throughout the world.



Mary Kouyoumdjian

Kouyoumdjian’s score uses the recorded voices as integral compositional elements, and draws on folk-music and contemporary-music practices. She says: “I come from refugee parents forced to immigrate to the U.S. as a consequence of the Lebanese Civil War. And my parents come from refugee parents forced to escape to Lebanon from Turkey during the Armenian genocide of 1915. Experiences like Milad Yousufi’s resonate with me, and topics of wartime, genocide, and one’s relationship to ‘home’ have played a large role in my music.”

see PULITZER, page 16





## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# César Veas Valencia

## *From Chile to Armenia with Love of Duduk and Everything*

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN – Love for Armenian music brought 33 years-old Chilean musician César Veas Valencia to Yerevan. From 2007 to 2013, he studied music, improvisation and electric guitar with teacher Jorge Díaz in Santiago, as well as performing on electric guitar and popular music at Pro-jazz Professional Institute. Later, he studied also music and sound therapy at Ruta Alegre Holistic training center, Santiago. In addition, he started singing sacred music in Vox Celeste Choir of Santiago. In 2017, Veas founded UniSono Terapias, a company that imports into Chile musical instruments focused on music and sound therapy. He also offered sound therapy and music therapy services for companies, schools, kindergartens, and private practice.

### César, when did you first encounter Armenian music?

It all started with Gurdjieff. I was deeply intrigued by his philosophy, as well as his music and dances. Wanting to learn more about him, I discovered he hailed from Gyumri, Armenia, sparking my interest in Armenian culture. I participated in the recording and release of the disc “Oriental Songs,” containing Gurdjieff’s music. My interest led me to explore Armenian music, especially Komitas, and when I first heard the sound of *duduk*, I was captivated instantly! I reached out to *duduk* player

Gagik Gasparyan in Córdoba, Argentina, who helped me to find an instrument and started giving me lessons. For about three years, I traveled two or three times per year to train with Gagik. Then, I felt the urge to visit Armenia, which brings me here today for the second time. My first visit was a six-month journey last year, and it was a wonderful experience. When I arrived, I only knew one person — a *duduk* master who had provided instruments for my small store in Santiago. He greeted me at the airport and helped me find accommodation. Finding a teacher was my next task. While working in a café in Yerevan, I noticed a musician whom I admired, Arsen Petrosyan, one of my favorite *duduk* players. I struck up a conversation with him, and I was fortunate that he agreed to be my teacher. He is a great person.

Komitas’s music has always deeply touched my heart. I continue to explore more Armenian music; recently, I’ve been listening to the songs of *Ashugh Jivani*, who has become my favorite for now. I’ve been pleasantly surprised by the high level of music in Armenia, whether it’s classical, folk, or jazz! Another memorable experience was meeting a guy at a dance festival who happened to be a choir singer. After expressing my interest in joining a choir, he introduced me to his choir conductor, and that’s how I became a member of the Khazer choir. So now, playing the *duduk* and singing in the choir are my main musical activities in Armenia.



Additionally, I decided to join the Armenian Voluntary Corps to immerse myself more in Armenian life and connect with locals. Currently, I’m working with the Akna organization, led by Levon Eskenian, the leader of the Gurdjieff Ensemble. One of our purposes is to organize a tour of the Ensemble to Latin America and Spain. In addition to my involvement in music, I also teach Spanish at the European University. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that many Armenians have a great love for the Spanish language and culture - another wonderful experience here!

### And how is your experience learning Armenian?

Shat dejvar eh (Very difficult). But I’m really enjoying learning Armenian, so I hope to speak it more as I go along. I actually started taking online classes before coming here. Fortunately, the university also offers Armenian classes. Interestingly, when I try to buy something in a store here, people often switch to English to help me. However, I prefer to practice my Armenian, so I say them: *Chem khosum angleren* (I don’t speak English).

### Have you ever organized Armenian concert in Chile?

Yes, before my trip to Armenia I had the opportunity to perform in a concert featuring solo *duduk* as well as *duduk* with dam. It was a wonderful experience, especially since after six months in Armenia, I had prepared a special repertoire. I met two Chilean musicians — one played the *shvee* and the other the *bloul* and *dap* (tambourine). We practiced together for two to three weeks and eventually held a concert, mostly attended by a Chilean audience. Additionally, I had the honor of performing for the Armenian community in Chile. I hope to continue sharing Armenian music through more concerts in Chile.

### César, how do you describe the sound of the *duduk*?

Deep and spiritual, that connects the listener with an ancient space.

### And don’t you think *duduk* is becoming very commonplace for Armenia?

It’s true that the *duduk* has become more popular for Armenia and in Armenia, but my first impression is that many people here don’t know much about Armenian music. It’s sad because I believe everyone should have a deep understanding and appreciation for it. However, this situation is not unique to Armenia; it’s similar in many countries. Nevertheless, there are many dedicated individuals working hard to research and learn Armenian mu-

sic and dance. I personally believe that the *duduk* deserves more recognition worldwide. While it’s true that the instrument has gained popularity in various countries, thanks in part to international films, many people mistakenly believe it’s easy to play. In reality, mastering the *duduk* requires serious training with a teacher. Unfortunately, some people here don’t understand that someone would travel to Armenia specifically to learn to play the *duduk*. Many people here do not understand that someone can come here to learn to play *duduk*.

No wonder, some years ago there was a Mexican guy here, Luis Argüelles, who learned playing *duduk* and now promotes the instrument in Mexico. And not only him...

### What else do you like in Armenia?

I like everything! I love Armenian dances very much! And people! They are very kind and warm, very open and emotional. I feel comfortable with them. The natural beauty of Armenia, particularly around Goris, Jermuk, and Lori, captivates me. Yerevan, with its numerous attractions, is a truly beautiful city. And let’s not forget the incredible cuisine — my favorites are *tolma* and long kebab, *haykakan surj* (Armenian coffee). The tastiest fruits and vegetables I tried here!

### Do you have any dreams regarding Armenia?

My future path is uncertain; I’m undecided between staying in Armenia or returning to Chile. However, in the short term, my dream is to forge connections between Armenia and other nations, starting with my homeland. I aspire to organize Armenian cultural projects in Chile and collaborate with Armenian musicians for international cultural exchanges. By sharing Armenia’s rich cultural heritage with the world, I hope to raise awareness and appreciation for its diverse traditions, which remain relatively unknown globally.

### Now the situation is not stable in Armenia...

Indeed, the situation in Armenia can be challenging, and I witnessed it firsthand during my visit last September. However, the political climate alone isn’t enough to make me leave Armenia at this moment. I believe that staying here allows me to fulfill a part of my purpose — to offer support during difficult times. Here, I can contribute more effectively to Armenia than I could in my own country.

It is very touching to hear such words from a non-Armenian. Thanks for this conversation, César!

71ST ANNUAL

## Armenian Night at the POPS

Wednesday, June 5, 2024 at 7:30 PM  
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with pianist  
**MARTA AZNAVOORIAN**  
and **Boston Pops Orchestra**  
**Keith Lockhart**, conductor

Presented by the Friends of Armenian Culture Society

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# Books

## Armenian Wonderwomen: Making The Impossible Possible

By Arpi Sarafian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

*Armenian Wonderwomen*, published in an Author's Edition in Yerevan, Armenia, in 2023, gives us a glimpse into the lives of 37 Armenian women, both historical and contemporary, who have defied the stereotype and made a difference with their achievements, yet have almost no representation in Armenian history books except "through marriage to kings or through motherhood."

With their stories, co-authors Gayane Aghabalyan and Elmira Ayvazyan, both from Yerevan, aim to educate 10-year-old schoolchildren about history's unfair treatment of women and about the need to bring about positive change in their lives.

The book is published in three versions — English, Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian — a phenomenon unique to an Armenian children's book.

The budding authors are thrilled about their vision of a future where there are no exclusions. While obviously guided by their love and admiration for the women featured in their book, they are also angry that history has chosen to ignore or to marginalize these exceptional women. Finding out about Diana Agabeg Apar, the very first woman to hold a diplomatic position, at 21, "refueled my anger and provided inspiration and drive," noted Aghabalyan.

Both women bemoan the fact that there are only three streets in Yerevan named after women. On a walk in the streets of the Armenian capital, the vigilant pair noticed a children's book about "Jobs for Men" and "Jobs for Women" displayed in a shop window. "We sometimes

We learn about Anita Caracotchian Conti, the first woman oceanographer, one of the first people to start conversations about overfishing in the world. We learn about Louise Texier, born Arpine Hovanessian, who became a car racer at 40, when women did not even have the right to own a car. Also featured are Berjouhi Parseghian, Katarine Zalian-Manoukian, and Varvare Sahakian, the three females who became members of the Parliament of the first Republic of Armenia when in many countries women did not have political rights.

"There are thousands more waiting to be unearthed," say the authors with enthusiasm.

Aghabalyan and Ayvazyan were recently in Los Angeles to promote their book. The presentation of the brave and articulate duo at an event organized by Abril bookstore, at the Center for Armenian Arts in Glendale, confirmed their unwavering belief in the possibility of change. With pride, yet with utmost modesty, they talked about the four years of hard work and dedication — "so much more than is obvious" — that went into the creation of the 75-page volume. The two shared stories of emotional meetings with the families of Diana Apar and of resistance fighter Khatun Yapudjian. Each contemporary wonderwoman featured in the book was interviewed for first-hand information. "It's communal work," they assert.

In her introduction of the authors, Melissa Bilal, Distinguished Research Fellow and New Promise Chair in Armenian Music, Arts and Culture at UCLA, described the book as a "feminist children's book." The label is apt. The effort to correct the historical injustice done to women is the core definition of feminism. Yet, recognizing that labels can be limiting, and aware of the connotations of



he read the stories. His comment evoked the popular adage that "the more things change the more they stay the same." Rather than dishearten them, however, the father's response redoubled their enthusiasm. "At no point did we consider giving up. There still is a chance to turn things around. The key is educating correctly," they say with confidence.

Aghabalyan referred to their passion about change as naive. A "paradoxical naïveté" she explained, as it was their "naive selves" that prompted them to go on when they might have given up as challenges were encountered. The two women sometimes wonder if "the topic is even relevant in an age consumed by violence and perennial wars." Yet, their faith in the possibility of transforming the status quo moved the audience. Inspired and excited, all rushed to secure copies of the books.

Making an "adult" topic accessible to children is no easy feat. A full-page illustration of each wonderwoman, facing the page-long text introducing her, grabs the young scholars' attention. Thought-provoking questions go with the images, such as "What do you know about climate



From left, Dr. Melissa Bilal, Gayane Aghabalyan and Elmira Ayvazyan (photo Karine Armen)

inadvertently reinforce the stereotype," they deplored. There is, nonetheless, no animosity, no belligerence in their pronouncements. Theirs is a peaceful demand to set things right.

The book starts with the pioneering novelist Srpuhi Dussap (Vahanian) who, defying all norms, defended a woman's right to education and encouraged women to think and act freely. Along with some other familiar names, featured in the slim volume are little known wonderwomen in diverse geographies, in a variety of fields — referees, weightlifters, farmers, animated film producers.

"exclusion" of the word "feminism" for many, the savvy authors were quick to point out that their undertaking was not exclusive to women, a stance which in no way diminishes their fight for a woman's rights. The two are in fact currently working on a project on Armenian men in the feminist movement. It was through writing "not by cutting her hair short and wearing ties," they remind us, that wonderwoman Zabel Yesayan expressed her free spirit and her independence. Indeed, having a few fathers in the audience accompanying their kids was refreshing.

"Nothing has changed," Aghabalyan's dad told her as



Co-Authors Gayane Aghabalyan, Elmira Ayvazyan (photo Karine Armen)

change and what can you do to prevent it?" "What is one daring dream you would want to pursue?" "What are some stereotypes you'd like to break?" also force them to think about issues, such as environmentalism, discrimination or stereotyping, and make the book relevant to their lives. The book can be enjoyed by children and adults alike.

*Armenian Wonderwomen* is a work in progress. The authors continue their connections and invite suggestions. Adding a new name to the list of women who have successfully crossed barriers gives them the greatest joy. To make their archival work available online globally, Aghabalyan and Ayvazyan have created a website, [www.Armenianwonderwomen.com](http://www.Armenianwonderwomen.com).

"We have the obligation to make it available for everyone," they affirm.

The passion of these visionaries for their mission to transform the world remains the key ingredient of the book. The *Armenian Wonderwomen* project is supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.





## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# Recipe Corner



by Christine  
Vartanian Datian



## One-of-a-kind Detroit-Style Meat Boregs

This recipe from The Armenian Kitchen's Robyn and Doug Kalajian for Detroit-Style Meat Boregs is adapted from a recipe by Dolly Matoian at St. John's Women's Guild in Southfield, Mich. Dolly's original recipe can be found in the Guild's outstanding cookbook, *Armenian Cuisine: Preserving Our Heritage*.

"A little over 10 years ago, the 111th Diocesan Assembly and Clergy Conference was held in Boca Raton, Fla. It was a whirlwind week of events with hundreds of attendees from mid-western, east coast, and southern states. In addition to the planned sessions and meetings, guests participated in luncheons, a kef time (featuring the sensational music of Johnny Berberian), area sightseeing, and a gala banquet. The week-long gathering culminated with a lavish, elegant farewell Sunday Brunch," says Robyn.

"Many of our attendees rolled up their sleeves alongside the local parishioners to create the massive menu for the brunch. Serving stations were decorated and set with many assorted salads, yalanchi, lahmajoun, cheese boregs, meat boregs, and hummus. A carving station featured sliced-to-order roast beef, ham and turkey. Desserts included kourabia cookies, paklava, semolina cakes, fruit kabobs, and more. The beverage station served tasty mimosas (orange juice and champagne), plain orange juice, and coffee to help wash everything down."

"For this dish, instead of using phyllo dough or puff pastry, the dough was more chorag-like. The meat filling had a nice 'kick' from the blend of black pepper and cayenne pepper in the filling. I got to sample a test boreg as it came out of the oven – it was soft, warm, and so delicious. I have made an attempt to break down the large-group recipe for the home kitchen but be warned – I have not tested this version. The new ingredient amounts below represent 1/8th the original recipe measurements," adds Robyn.

"This reduced recipe should yield about 40 to 45 boregs. I suggest having one or two extra pairs of hands to assist in the kitchen. It's important to prepare the meat mixture one day in advance. Don't be discouraged by the lengthy recipe. One thing is for sure, I can appreciate the time and effort the very talented Detroit ladies put into this recipe, and I truly did savor every wonderful bite," she says.

Here's Robyn's (untested) home version recipe:

### FILLING INGREDIENTS:

- 1 lb. chopped onions
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 3/4 lbs. ground lamb
- 1 3/4 lb. ground sirloin (or chuck)
- 1 tablespoon Kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 1/2 sticks unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- 1 cup fresh chopped parsley

### DOUGH INGREDIENTS:

- 1 1/2 sticks unsalted butter
- 1/4 cup vegetable shortening
- 1 cup milk
- 4 eggs
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon dry granular yeast
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 cup warm water
- 2 - 2 1/2 lbs. all-purpose flour (approx. 7 1/4 to 9 cups)

Egg wash: 2 eggs, beaten

Topping: Regular or black sesame seeds

### Day 1:

#### DIRECTIONS FOR FILLING PREPARATION:

Heat vegetable oil in a skillet. Sauté onions until soft, but not mushy. Strain onions in a colander, pressing firmly to remove any liquid. Set aside until ready to use.

In a large frying pan, cook lamb and beef over medium heat until brown. Break meat down with a fork to remove any large lumps. Strain any excess fat. Place cooked onions and meat in a large mixing bowl. Stir in all of the seasonings. Taste for flavor and spiciness. Make any adjustments, if necessary. Melt the butter in a skillet and add to the meat-onion mixture. Finally, add the chopped parsley. Place mixture in shallow containers; cover and refrigerate until day 2.

### Day 2:

#### DIRECTIONS FOR DOUGH PREPARATION:

Melt butter and shortening in a saucepan. Allow to cool. Add milk to butter mixture; set aside.

Using a hand or stand mixer and a large bowl, beat eggs and sugar until well-blended. Begin adding flour, a little at a time, to the egg mixture for a uniform mixture.

In a medium bowl, combine the 1/2 cup warm water (110-115°F), yeast and sugar, whisking to dissolve. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to proof. Add proofed yeast to the flour mixture and knead dough well.

Using a food scale, portion the dough into 1 1/2 to 2 oz. portions; place on trays, cover with plastic wrap or parchment paper and allow to rest. Portion the meat into 1 1/2 to 2 oz. (or about 1/4 cup) portions. On a work surface (no flour should be needed), roll each dough portion into 4-inch circles, and place on platters.

Forming and baking the boregs:

Hold each round of dough in one hand, top with meat mixture. Pinch or fold the dough over the meat to completely seal the filling.

Place – seam side down – on parchment-lined baking sheets. Lightly press down to make a bun shape instead of a ball shape. Continue the process until the trays are filled. Allow boregs to rest about 15 minutes before baking. Brush tops lightly with egg wash and sprinkle with regular or black sesame seeds, if desired.

Bake in preheated 375°F oven (350°F for convection oven) until golden. Serve immediately. If not serving immediately, place baked boregs on cooling racks; cool completely. Place cooled boregs in freezer bags in single layers, and freeze until ready to use.

Prior to serving, defrost boregs in the refrigerator, and bake in a preheated 325°F oven until warmed through.

Yield: 40-45 boregs

### Purchase today:

#### *Armenian Cuisine: Preserving Our Heritage Cookbook*

Over 450 tested recipes from the Detroit metropolitan Armenian community, updated using modern techniques and equipment. Detailed description of cooking and baking methods including tips for preparation. The cookbook has a wipe-clean cover that lays flat when opened.

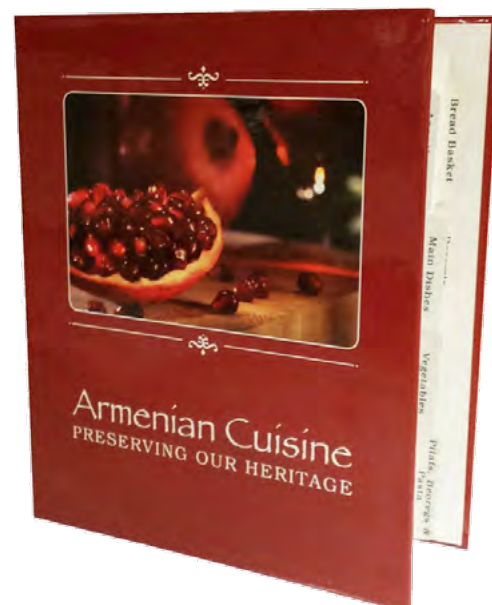
This cookbook is made to last and will be a treasured addition to your collection. \$35 with free shipping. To order, go to: <https://stjohnwomensguild.square.site/>

Consider a donation to support the mission of the Women's Guild of St. John Armenian Church. Women's Guild strives to nurture fellowship and service to our Church and community through a variety of activities and events. Your funds will help us continue outreach activities in Armenia such as sponsoring orphans and supporting Mer Doon, which provides young women with a safe home and instructs them in life skills.

For information, contact:

Women's Guild of St. John Armenian Church, 22001 Northwestern Highway, Southfield, MI 48075

Mail to: [sjacwg@gmail.com](mailto:sjacwg@gmail.com)







ARTS & CULTURE



The Armenian State Symphony Orchestra

# Armenian Symphony Orchestra To Tour US for First Time

NEW YORK — The Armenian State Symphony Orchestra, led by the Founding Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Sergey Smbatyan, is gearing up for its debut tour in the United States this summer with performances at three of America’s most prestigious concert halls. The orchestra will perform at Boston’s Symphony Hall on June 26; New York City’s Carnegie Hall on June 27; and Los Angeles Music Center’s Walt Disney Concert Hall on June 29.

Performing extensively in its native

by his debut performance with the London Symphony Orchestra at Windsor Castle, under the auspices of Prince Charles, now King Charles III, followed by a subsequent invitation to conduct the Philharmonia Orchestra at Buckingham Palace. Smbatyan also serves as the principal conductor of the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra as well.

He is a committed advocate for cultivating youth and supports several educational enterprises together with his orchestra. Among the initiatives designed and implemented by Smbatyan was the creation of the World Orchestra for Peace in 2015, in commemoration of the centenary of the Armenian Genocide. He has been recognized as a UNICEF National Ambassador since 2023.

Over the course of its almost two-decade history, the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra has earned an international reputation for its orchestral virtuosity and has garnered sterling reviews for its overseas concert tours and numerous notable recordings. The orchestra performs a rich and diverse repertoire covering multiple genres and performance formats, ranging from symphonies to ballet and opera music to symphonic arrangements of popular and cinematic music, or jazz interpretations of classical music.

The orchestra will perform the music of legendary Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian.

Tickets are available at:  
June 26, Boston, Symphony Hall <https://www.bso.org/events/armenian-state-symphony-orchestra-2024>

June 27, New York, Carnegie Hall <https://www.carnegiehall.org/calendar/2024/06/27/armenian-state-symphony-orchestra-0800pm>

June 29, Los Angeles, Disney Hall <https://www.musiccenter.org/tickets-free-events/lease-events/armenian-state-symphony-orchestra/>

Ticket information can be found at <https://us.armsymphony.am/ustour2024/>.



Conductor Sergey Smbatyan

Armenia and touring numerous countries around Asia and Europe, the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra boasts a versatile repertoire that spans from all-time favorites and orchestral masterpieces of Armenian and global musical heritage to cutting-edge premieres of works by contemporary composers. The program for all three U.S. concert engagements will celebrate the legendary Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978). Under the baton of Smbatyan and joined by featured soloist Sergey Khachatryan (violin), the orchestra will showcase Khachaturian’s *Violin Concerto*, along with pieces from ballet suites “Spartacus” and “Gayaneh.”

Sergy Smbatyan is an acclaimed cultural leader in Armenia and is increasingly in demand on the international stage. Not long after founding what is now the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra in 2005, Smbatyan’s conducting career was highlighted

# CALENDAR

## OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

### MASSACHUSETTS

**MAY 26 — First Holy Communion.** The community is invited to celebrate the children’s First Holy Communion, on Sunday, at 10:30 a.m., at Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church, 200 Lexington St., Belmont.

**JUNE 3 — St. James Men’s Club Monthly Dinner & Fellowship.** Guest Speaker will be Greg Jundanian, who will discuss “The Armenians of Whitinsville Project.” His website acts as a public archive for Armenians who had either once lived in Whitinsville or had ancestors who had lived there. The project is a look into a special community as well as a glimpse into how Armenian identity has evolved over the years. Social hour [mezza] 6.15 p.m., Losh Kebab and Kheyma Dinner 7 p.m. \$20 per person. 464 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown

**JUNE 5 — Armenian Night at the Pops** with pianist Marta Aznavoorian and the Boston Pops Orchestra, Keith Lockhart, conductor, Wednesday, 7.30 p.m., Symphony Hall, Boston. Presented by Friends of Armenian Culture Society (FACSBoston.org).

**JUNE 9 — Father’s Day Dinner** open to the community at Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church. Catered by Vico Italian Restaurant. Sunday, at 5 PM, with live entertainment by Luigi Grasso and Dj Ryno. Tickets: \$85 Adults, \$50 Youth/Children, for reservations call Sonia 617-875-1107 or Parish office 617-489-2280, at Nishan and Margrit Atinizian Hall, 200 Lexington Street, Belmont, MA 02478.

**JUNE 9 — St. James Armenian Festival – Annual Picnic!** Delicious Armenian food, Live Armenian music, children’s activities with moon bounce, face painting, and more! Rain or shine. Noon-5 p.m. St. James Armenian Church, 465 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown. For more info visit [www.stjames-watertown.org/festival](http://www.stjames-watertown.org/festival) or call 617.923.8860.

**JUNE 9 — Armenian Cultural Foundation: Mirak Chamber Music Series** Presents Alan Hovhaness Tribute Concert, 3 p.m., Arlington Town Hall, 730 Mass. Ave., Arlington. Works by Hindemith, Hovhaness, Khachaturian, Tassone. Performers: Wei Zhao, Yelena Beriyeva, Knarik Nerkararian, Jing-Huey Wei, Sylvie Zakarian, Aaron Larget-Caplan, Michael Peipman, Arlington-Belmont Chamber Chorus, The Menotomy Chamber Orchestra. More details to follow.

**JUNE 13 — Under the Strawberry Moon.** Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston at 8:15 p.m. Meet & Greet. Chocolate Dipped Strawberries hosted by Ovenbird Cafe. RSVP [hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org](mailto:hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org) Armenian Heritage Park ongoing Programs: MOVEMENT & WALKING MEDITATION. LABYRINTH WELLNESS WALKS TOGETHER through October. Tuesdays at 5:30 p.m. Series is offered in collaboration with the Boston Health Commission and The Greenway Conservancy Fitness program. For details, [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](http://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar)

**CELEBRATING WHAT UNITES US!** Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston Each month highlights the country of origin of many living and working in the City of Boston and beyond. Series is offered in collaboration with Age-Friendly Boston. For dates and details, [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](http://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar)

**JUNE 16 — Boston Tekeyan Cultural Association** is hosting a Father’s Day Bar-B-Q. Sunday, 2 p.m. at the Baika Building, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown (Use Norseman Street side door). \$40 per person. Khorovadz, pilaf, salad and more. Special raffle. RSVP [bostontca@gmail.com](mailto:bostontca@gmail.com) or call Sossy at 617-281-1647.

**OCTOBER 25-27 — Save the date!** Sanctuary consecration of the Armenian Apostolic Church at Hye Pointe. Presided over by Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern). 1280 Boston Road, Haverhill. Details to follow.

**NOVEMBER 16 — St. Stephen’s Armenian Elementary School** will celebrate with a 40th Anniversary Gala. Saturday, 6.30 p.m., Hyatt Regency Cambridge. Details to follow.

**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.

# Work by Composer Mary Kouyoumdjian Pulitzer Finalist

PULITZER, from page 12

Kouyoumdjian is a composer and documentarian with projects ranging from concert works to multimedia collaborations and film scores. As a first generation Armenian-American and having come from a family directly affected by the Lebanese Civil War and Armenian Genocide, she uses a sonic palette that draws on her heritage, interest in music

as documentary, and background in experimental composition to progressively blend the old with the new. A strong believer in freedom of speech and the arts as an amplifier of expression, her compositional work often integrates recorded testimonies with resilient individuals and field recordings of place to invite empathy by humanizing complex experiences around social and political conflict.

Kouyoumdjian has received commissions for such organizations as the New York Philharmonic, Kronos Quartet, Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Her music has been described as “eloquently scripted” and “emotionally wracking” by the *New York Times*.

Kouyoumdjian holds a D.M.A and M.A. in composition from Columbia Uni-

versity; an M.A. in Scoring for Film & Multimedia from New York University; and a B.A. in Music Composition from the University of California, San Diego. She has previously been on faculty at Columbia University, Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Brooklyn College’s Feirstein School of Cinema, Mannes Prep, and the New York Philharmonic’s Very Young Composers program.





COMMENTARY

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



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# Unjustly Condemning Pashinyan of Cryptic Engagement with Genocide Denial Undermines Credibility of Lemkin Institute

By K. M. Greg Sarkissian

This article aims to better understand the statement released on May 10, 2024, by the Lemkin Institute unjustifiably “Condemning Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Cryptic Engagement with Genocide Denial.” This statement was issued in response to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s message on the occasion of the 109th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide on April 24, 2024. I found the Lemkin Institute’s article surprising, unnecessary and irresponsible and reading it left me seeking to understand the motivations and foundations for its claims.

As the President of the Zoryan Institute, I would like to underscore that this article does not reflect the official position of the Zoryan Institute, nor does it serve as an endorsement of Mr. Pashinyan’s message on the occasion of the 109th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, or approval or disapproval of his performance as Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. The opinions expressed herein are my own as someone who has dedicated my life to the studies of the phenomenon of genocide as a universal experience, and its relation to human rights.

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for the work undertaken by the Lemkin Institute in the field of genocide studies. In particular, I want to pay tribute to Dr. Elisa Von Joeden-Forgey, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Lemkin Institute. Dr. Von Joeden-Forgey is a former Endowed Chair in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Keene State College, Keene, NH, USA. I personally admire her dedication to the field of genocide studies and for the work she undertakes at the Lemkin Institute. We, at the Zoryan Institute, are grateful for Dr. Von Joden-Forgey’s many years of contributions including as member of faculty and acting director of the Genocide and Human Rights University Program (GHRUP), as former editor of Zoryan Institute’s Genocide Studies International journal, and finally as a formerly active Board Member.

Now as to why I was conflicted reading the Lemkin Institute’s recent article raising concerns about Prime Minister Pashinyan’s engagement with genocide denial. Genocide denial is defined as the attempt to deny or minimize the scale and severity of an instance of genocide. Denial itself, is an integral aspect of genocide.

In the very first paragraph of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Armenian Genocide commemoration message of April 24, 2024, Mr. Pashinyan clearly asserts the purpose of that day and concisely affirms the Armenian Genocide: “Today we commemorate the memory of 1.5 million victims of the Armenian Genocide, the Meds Yeghern, who were put to the sword in the Ottoman Empire since 1915 for being Armenians.”

In this paragraph, which seems to have been inadvertently excluded from the Lemkin Institute’s analysis, Mr. Pashinyan does not attempt to deny or minimize the scale of the Armenian Genocide; rather, he emphasizes four implicit affirmations of genocide recognition: First, he establishes parity between the terms “Armenian Genocide” and “Meds Yeghern” allowing for their interchangeability. Secondly, by affirming the loss of 1.5 million Armenians, he shows no attempt to deny or minimize the scale and severity of the genocide. Furthermore, he acknowledges that 1.5 million Armenians were put to the sword throughout the Ottoman Empire, not just Anatolia. Lastly, that these 1.5 million victims were massacred simply for being Armenians, based on national, ethnic, and religious considerations.

One wonders why the Lemkin Institute’s article does not mention this first paragraph in their analysis, which succinctly recognizes the Armenian Genocide, its magnitude, and the reasons behind it. Interestingly, examining the Prime Minister’s commemorative speech of 2023 reveals a continuum in Mr. Pashinyan’s ideas and philosophy on the subject. He approaches genocide affirmation differently from the way we, as survivors and their descendants, have over the past five or six decades, and

brings the impact of inter-generational trauma to the discussion.

In 2024, he states: “Meds Yeghern became a nationwide tragedy and grief for us, and without exaggeration, is a predetermining factor for our socio-psychology. Even today, we perceive the world, our environment, ourselves under the dominant influence of the mental trauma of the Meds Yeghern, and we have not overcome that trauma. This means that, being an internationally recognized state, we often relate and compete with other countries and the international community in a state of mental trauma, and for this reason, sometimes we cannot correctly distinguish the realities and factors, historical processes and projected horizons.”

In 2023, he stated: “The April 24 march is perhaps the most impactful occurrence that has predetermined and is predetermining our reality, an exceptional day to think about our history, past and future. What do young parents think when walking to the Tsitsernakaberd memorial, often holding the hands of young children, or what do elderly people with more life experience think? “They are probably thinking about two questions. Why did the Meds Yeghern happen and what should be done to prevent its recurrence? Hundreds and thousands of works have been written about the causes of the Armenian Genocide, many reasons and motives have been revealed. As for the methodology to exclude the recurrence of such a crime, it largely depends on our understanding of the concepts of ‘state’ and ‘region’.”

To me, it seems that Prime Minister Pashinyan is affirming the recognition of the Armenian Genocide while simultaneously seeking ways to help deal with the trauma which has shaped Armenians and their outlook on the future – especially for those living in today’s Armenia, a sovereign state.

The Lemkin Institute article states: “While we do not generally involve ourselves in domestic affairs of states unless there is an internal threat of genocide, we must address concerns stemming from recent statements made by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan that appear to diverge from fundamental principles of genocide prevention, genocide recognition, and transitional justice, and that directly relate to issues of Armenian national security.”

In my opinion, the Lemkin Institute’s misinterpretation of the Prime Minister’s message as an internal threat of genocide has led to an unwarranted and unjustified interference in the

internal affairs of the state. Consequently, their concerns were not called for.

There was no divergence from the governing principles of genocide prevention as prescribed by the Genocide Convention, which aims to prevent atrocity crimes against humanity and to understand the root causes of those crimes, particularly genocide. This is clearly the sentiment in Pashinyan’s message: “What should we do and what should we not do in order to overcome the trauma of genocide and exclude it as a threat? These are questions that should be the key subject of discussion in our political and philosophical thinking, but this kind of point of view of dealing with the fact of the *Meds Yeghern* is not common among us.”

By intentionally omitting the opening statement of the Prime Minister’s remarks from the article, and falsely interpreting the overall essence of Mr. Pashinyan’s statement, the writer has acted irresponsibly by politicizing the Lemkin Institute. They had neglected the statement of the Foreign Minister on the same date which clearly affirms the Armenian Genocide. At the very least, a detached, objective, and thorough analysis would have indicated reasons for not including the entirety of the message. Finally, to restore its reputation as a scholarly organization, the Lemkin Institute must issue a public apology to Prime Minister Pashinyan and the people of Armenia.

(Sarkissian is president of the Zoryan Institute, headquartered in Toronto.)





## COMMENTARY

# Lemkin Institute Says Pashinyan's Words Minimize Armenian Genocide

In the wake of the Artsakh genocide, the Lemkin Institute remains committed to engaging in active prevention work in the South Caucasus while advocating for justice and accountability. It released the following statement about Nikol Pashinyan's message on April 24.

While we do not generally involve ourselves in domestic affairs of states unless there is an internal threat of genocide, we must address concerns stemming from recent statements made by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan that appear to diverge from fundamental principles of genocide prevention, genocide recognition, and transitional justice, and that directly relate to issues of Armenian national security.

We are particularly perplexed and alarmed by aspects of Prime Minister Pashinyan's commemorative statement on 24 April 2024 (Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day), as well as a recent interview with Pashinyan's associate Hovik Aghazaryan questioning Armenia's legal basis to pursue justice against Turkey, and discussions led by Civil Contract party member and parliamentarian Andranik Kocharyan about compiling a list of genocide victims.

On April 24, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, the Armenian Prime Minister released an official commemorative statement in which he appears to engage in victim blaming with the purpose of questioning the accountability of Turkey and Azerbaijan for the crime of genocide.

His statement further appears to erase the ongoing threats posed to Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan by reframing them as the baseless trauma-induced fears within Armenian society. Pashinyan's apparent agreement with key points in Turkey and Azerbaijan's denialist narratives as well as his apparent embrace of these countries' assertions that Armenia is the obstacle to peace in the South Caucasus have met with sustained controversy within the Armenian public.

Perhaps most striking about Pashinyan's statement on the genocide was the absence of any mention of aggressors. In paragraph three, for example, Pashinyan — discussing the period in the Ottoman Empire leading up to the 1915 genocide — cryptically asserted that "...the Armenian people, who had no statehood, had lost their statehood centuries ago, and essentially had forgotten the tradition of statehood, became victims of geopolitical intrigues and false promises, lacking first of all a political mind capable of making the world and its rules understandable." This statement seems to assert that Armenians mysteriously experienced genocide due to their own witlessness. By asserting that Armenians were solely "victims of geopolitical intrigues and false promises," Pashinyan further disregards the long-term and multi-layered historical oppression of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as well as the deep and visceral contempt for Armenians among members of the Committee of Union and Progress, the ruling party during the genocide. In other words, Pashinyan's statement fails to recognize the role played by the ethnic, religious, and cultural animosity for Armenians in the Turkic supremacist campaign of extermination that targeted Armenians during World War I.

Furthermore, instead of attributing blame for the genocide to the leaders of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Pashinyan redirects attention towards Armenians, and specifically their apparent incapacity to understand politics at the time. He appears to be referencing the actions of the Russian Empire and Western powers during that era, who promised to protect Armenians but did not follow through, which aggravated the Ottoman leaders' sense of external threat to the empire and drew negative attention to the Armenians as "foreign agents." However, he does not state this outright; instead he seems to believe that Armenians brought the genocide upon themselves by misunderstanding the political terrain. Pashinyan's talking points in this passage seem ironic, given that he has himself embraced Western offers to save Armenia from its hostile neighbors. Yet, his talking points also echo the official position of Turkey regarding the Armenian Genocide which justified it by contracting "against an onslaught of external invaders and internal nationalist independence movements". By parroting the Turkish narrative of the events of 1915-1923, the Armenian Prime Minister risks absolving Turkey of its responsibility for the Armenian Genocide, downplaying all previous acknowledgment efforts. Further, it may substantially hamper the continuing work on international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and Turkish accountability — something that the worldwide Armenian diaspora, as well as genocide scholars and activists, have been fighting for.

Pashinyan's argument that "Armenian people, who had no statehood, had lost their statehood centuries ago, and

essentially had forgotten the tradition of statehood" inexplicably plays into the denialist agenda of Turkey and Azerbaijan by obliquely mischaracterizing Armenian efforts to gain equal rights and human security in the Ottoman empire with foolish attempts to exercise a quest for independent statehood for which they had no capacity. The vast majority of Armenians under Ottoman rule were not seeking secession, but rather security and justice. Pashinyan's words directly echo the official Turkish view of the Armenian people as rebellious "traitors" who collaborated with hostile European powers to bring about the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and who therefore betrayed the country. In fact, in this passage, Pashinyan seems to be making the case that Armenians can only avoid future genocides by capitulating to present-day Turkey's expansionist designs.

Pashinyan clearly sought in his speech to challenge the wisdom of seeking accountability from Turkey. He noted that "[Armenians] must stop the searches of a homeland, because we have found that homeland, our Promised Land...but the found and real homeland, in the person of the Republic of Armenia." While land disputes arising from genocide can certainly set the stage for another genocide of the landless survivors, jettisoning the rights to memory and to property is not something that can be done by a leader as a *fait accompli*. While certainly the modern Republic of Armenia deserves celebration as a homeland for all Armenians, the millennia-long presence of Armenians in the region known as 'historical Armenia' (including Western Armenia, Nakhichevan, and Artsakh) should not be ignored. Indeed, Turkey should be brought to understand that it must seek reconciliation with Armenia — not the other way around.

Alarmingly, Pashinyan's words come shortly after Hovik Aghazaryan, Armenian National Assembly member and ally to Nikol Pashinyan, stated in an interview that "[b]ecause the Genocide took place in the Ottoman Empire...We as a state did not exist then, so we cannot be the demanding party... We cannot demand anything from Turkey...Based on what international standards?" Aghazaryan displays a startling lack of understanding of transitional and restorative justice mechanisms in the wake of mass atrocity, which unfortunately only helps Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ilham Aliyev avoid historical responsibility for the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, this narrative could potentially weaken international efforts to recognize and address the Armenian Genocide by casting doubt on Armenia's legal basis to pursue justice. It is crucial to recognize that the absence of statehood at that time does not diminish Armenians' status as victims of genocide or negate their right to seek justice for the crimes committed against their ancestors. Other indigenous groups who have experienced genocide have pursued justice long after the fact, including the Herero and Namaqua people in Namibia and indigenous Canadians, Australians, and Americans.

The point of the recent spate of cryptic messages from Civil Contract Party members seems to be summed up in a passage in Pashinyan's statement that casts doubt on the capacity of the Armenian nation to properly analyze reality. Pashinyan suggested that the trauma of the genocide (referred to here by its Armenian name, *Meds Yeghern*, or 'Great Evil Crime') is coloring the perspective of Armenians on the current crisis in the South Caucasus:

"*Meds Yeghern* became a nationwide tragedy and grief for us, and without exaggeration, is a predetermining factor for our socio-psychology. Even today, we perceive the world, our environment, ourselves under the dominant influence of the mental trauma of the *Meds Yeghern*, and we have not overcome that trauma. This means that, being an internationally recognized state, we often relate and compete with other countries and the international community in a state of mental trauma, and for this reason, sometimes we cannot correctly distinguish the realities and factors, historical processes and projected horizons."

Pashinyan's talking point here echoes language one often hears in Western policy circles, which suggest that Armenians have nothing real to fear from Turkey and Azerbaijan and instead are exhibiting a kind of 'genocide syndrome' that makes them poor reporters of their own conditions. While the Lemkin Institute does not deny that communities that have experienced genocide are irredeemably impacted by that experience, we dispute the psychologization and pathologization of that experience, which suggests that the lessons learned make people unnecessarily alert. In our experience, genocide survivors and their descendants have a very keen read on the world and are well positioned to see genocides around them, in-

cluding threats of genocides against their identity group.

It is important to note that Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan stated only a day before, referring to Armenia, that, "[i]t is always better to act on the realities of the time than to act on fictional historical narratives that have nothing to do with reality. Pashinyan has already understood this." It's deeply troubling for the Armenian Prime Minister thought to align his commemorative remarks with the stance of Turkey's premier, especially considering Erdoğan's consistent denial of the Armenian Genocide.

Pashinyan ends his statement with another baffling point, this one about the idea of "Never Again." "Never again," he said. "We should not say this to others, but to ourselves. And this is not an accusation against us at all, but...only we,[sic] are responsible and the director of our destiny and we are obliged...to carry that responsibility in the domain of our sovereign decisions and perceptions." It is hard to read this sentence as implying anything except that the responsibility for preventing genocide by Turkey and Azerbaijan rests on the Armenian people themselves. In fact, Pashinyan's use of the word "responsible" suggests that he views the genocide as a punishment for their "mistakes" under the Ottomans. This framing shifts the burden for preventing future atrocities onto the victims of genocide, which is unfair and unjust. Such victim blaming is a denial technique used by perpetrators and occasionally a defense mechanism among members of the victimized group who resent past vulnerability and feel shame. However it is used, victim blaming always expresses hostility to the victimized group, which is never to blame for genocide.

Finally, and worryingly, this statement lacks any mention of a call for collective and international action to uphold and advocate for prevention and recognition, absolving other nations and actors of their obligations to intervene in cases of genocide.

Armenian concerns about Pashinyan's April 24 statement must be understood in the context of other baffling statements from Civil Contract party members this spring, which have made Armenia's land concessions to Azerbaijan all the more alarming. On April 16 Armenian MP Andranik Kocharyan claimed that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was planning to compile a comprehensive list of victims of the Armenian Genocide to establish irrefutable documentation of the genocide's victims and to verify "where, how and under what conditions" they were killed. He emphasized the importance of this list for future foreign relations, suggesting that without it, the genocide could be denied by the "other side" (i.e. Turkey). Kocharyan later retracted his claims following criticism, stating that Pashinyan had not actually aimed to compile such a list and that the topic was not under discussion within the ruling party.

Armenian genocide scholars were alarmed by this statement, as Turkey has been demanding such a list since the 1960s in its efforts to deny the Armenian genocide. Retrieving comprehensive records of victims poses significant challenges, primarily due to the absence of official and full documentation for many individuals who undoubtedly perished. This challenge is aggravated by historical practices within the Ottoman Empire, which often neglected records related to its ethnic minorities. Turkey's historical erasure and falsification of archives further exacerbate the issue, making it increasingly difficult to access accurate information.

As genocide expert Dr. Suren Manukyan, UNESCO Chair in Genocide Studies at Yerevan State University, pointed out, it is essential to recognize that the concept of genocide extends beyond mere mortality statistics. Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide does not specify a particular number of victims required for an act to be classified as genocide. The number of victims will not change the fact that the Armenian Genocide remains a genocide. Therefore, fixating solely on compiling a list overlooks the multifaceted nature of genocide and its profound implications.

The Armenian Genocide is of course not the only case where compiling a comprehensive list of victim names is an impossible task. Despite thorough record-keeping efforts by Nazi Germany and the availability of relevant archives post-war, along with systematic interviews conducted with survivors, for example, there is still substantial disagreement regarding the precise number of Holocaust victims.

The Turkish state regularly polices statements commemorating the Armenian Genocide. No country is immune from the pressure, as was evidenced by President

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## COMMENTARY

## MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

## Donations Tilt Vatican in Favor Of Azerbaijan

In a lengthy article published in the *Irpmedia.irpi.eu* in Italian on March 27, 2024, titled, “How Vatican helped legitimize the Aliyev autocracy in Azerbaijan,” Simone Zoppellaro exposes Vatican’s pro-Azerbaijan tilt due to financial donations, despite Armenia being a Christian nation, while Azerbaijan is Islamic.

On Feb. 22, 2020, the autocratic leader of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, and his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, the country’s vice president, paid a state visit to the Vatican. They were received officially by Pope Francis, Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher. Mrs. Aliyeva was at the Vatican to receive the highest honor awarded to a lay person by the Holy See: “The Grand Cross.” The award is proposed by the Diocesan Bishops “as a sign of appreciation and gratitude for services to the Church or to society reserved for Heads of State, ministers, ambassadors, and royalty.” However, the driving force behind Vatican’s interest in Azerbaijan is the financial support provided by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation.

Ironically, despite Azerbaijan’s intolerance of minorities, dissidents and other religions, the Holy See expressed its appreciation to “Azerbaijan’s openness and peaceful attitude towards different faiths.”

Fearing the loss of Azerbaijan’s donations, the Vatican has been reluctant to allow any criticism of Baku, particularly by its own clergy. “Father Georges-Henri Russyen was expelled from the Pontifical Oriental Institute because he was critical of those who did not want to use the formula ‘Armenian genocide.’”

Given the expectations of benefiting from Azerbaijan’s “Caviar Diplomacy,” the Vatican has not been willing to say anything more substantial than emphasizing “the importance of intercultural and inter-religious dialog in favor of peaceful coexistence among different religious and ethnic groups,” meaning Armenians and Azeris. The Pope prayed for the inhabitants of Karabakh, hoping “that the talks between the parties, with the support of the international community, will foster a lasting agreement that will end the humanitarian crisis.” Even during the 2020 War, “the Church was unable of going beyond generic appeals for moderation ‘to all the parties involved and to the international community’ to ‘lay down their weapons.’”

On October 24, 2023, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan received from the Apostolic Nuncio José Avelino Bettencourt the same award given three years earlier to Aliyeva, Azerbaijan’s Vice President. However, there was a major difference. While Aliyeva received her award directly from the Pope, Pashinyan was honored by an Apostolic Nuncio. There were also other differences which “helped consolidate the power of the Aliyev family, despite human rights violations in Artsakh.”

“Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, honorary president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Culture and chairman of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Ar-

chaeology, is the highest Vatican official who has made the most efforts to open a dialog with Azerbaijan.” He was awarded the Order of Friendship in 2013 by the Azerbaijani authorities -- a high honor offered for a “special contribution to the development of friendly, economic and cultural relations between Azerbaijan and a foreign state.”

Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti is considered “the protagonist of the privileged channel” established between the Vatican and Baku. “Highly educated and polyglot, ambitious and lover of power, Cardinal Gugerotti has known the Aliyev family since 2002, when Pres. Heydar Aliyev, in power since 1969, was still alive.”

“In the early 2000s, Gugerotti met with the Azerbaijani authorities as Nuncio for the Southern Caucasus, a position he assumed in 2001. Before then this nunciature for the Holy See included only Georgia and Armenia. Those were the years in which Russia guaranteed a ceasefire in the region, after Armenia had defeated Azerbaijan in the first conflict. The ethnic hatred that is still fuel for the conflict was beginning to settle, but Nuncio Gugerotti called Azerbaijan a ‘country [that] is a symbol of peaceful coexistence between people of different religions.’”

“Ten years after he began his mission as Apostolic Nuncio in 2011, Gugerotti signed the historic agreement which, for the first time, regulated relations between Baku and the Catholic Church. At the time of ratification, recalls a 2019 book produced by the Foundation for the Promotion of Moral Values from Baku entitled ‘Christianity in Azerbaijan,’ Gugerotti expressed gratitude to the (Azeri) government for creating the conditions that made possible [the agreement], emphasizing that our country always remained committed to the principles of tolerance, and noting that the agreement was the first document of its kind, because the Vatican had never signed such an agreement with any state before.”

According to Gugerotti, “Azerbaijan has once again demonstrated its tolerance. Now the whole world is witnessing it. I am sure that this document will receive a positive response in the international world and will be remembered as a great historical event. The reaction of the press from day one proves us right. On behalf of the Holy Throne and the Crown, I extend my deep thanks for all this to President Ilham Aliyev and the Government of Azerbaijan.”

Since 2009, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, headed by Mehriban Aliyeva, has funded various activities in the Vatican: restoration projects, exhibitions and concerts. Other projects funded by Azerbaijan included: the Roman catacombs, the Vatican Museums, the Vatican Apostolic Library, and Catholic churches in France and Azerbaijan. These donations amount to one million euros.

In 2013, Gugerotti received the Movses Khorenatsi Medal — the highest Armenian honor — from the then-President Serzh Sargsyan for his important contribution to Armenian studies, but also the effort aimed at strengthening relations between Yerevan and the Holy See.

The author of the article concluded that the close relationship between the Vatican and Azerbaijan has had the effect, perhaps unintended, of strengthening the hegemonic role of the Azeri autocracy... which may contribute to a diplomatic normalization that would put in the background, or erase, crimes and aggressions committed by the Azeri autocracy.

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Barack Obama’s choice not to label the massacre of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire as genocide during the 100th anniversary commemoration in an effort to balance the US-Turkey relationship amidst regional instability. While recognizing the significance of the centennial to the Armenian people, the administration emphasized a commitment to addressing atrocities without explicitly using the term “genocide.” This decision disappointed Armenian-American groups, and even some of Obama’s allies, who saw it as a betrayal of truth and trust. Pashinyan, though he continues to call the Armenian genocide a genocide, is nevertheless pursuing talking points that are at odds with the field of genocide studies, the ample historical documentation of 1915-1923, as well as the vast majority of Armenians. Tellingly, this year

President Joe Biden released a more strongly-worded statement than Pashinyan.

Pashinyan bears responsibility for any statements that deny or downplay the Armenian Genocide, as they not only jeopardize the painstaking efforts to secure its recognition, but also establish a dangerous precedent for the whitewashing of such atrocities amid a shifting geopolitical landscape that is threatening Armenian sovereignty. While the Lemkin Institute understands that the Prime Minister is under immense pressure from his neighbors, as well as foreign powers, to mollify and perhaps capitulate to the demands of Armenia’s hostile and threatening neighbors, we also know that efforts to appease genocidal states are almost always in vain. The Prime Minister must uphold the integrity of historical truth and acknowledge the gravity of genocide to prevent its recurrence and ensure justice for the victims, while safeguarding against future atrocities.

This becomes even more critical in the context of alarming Azerbaijani territorial claims and its enduring genocidal policies against Armenians over the

past decades. Not confronting historical truths only emboldens those who seek to erase or distort history for their own agendas. Genocide stands as one of humanity’s darkest crimes, and any attempt to rationalize, justify, or sanitize it must be rejected. If the Prime Minister is calling for Armenians to address transgenerational trauma as a nation, it is important to note that this can only be accomplished through national discussions and education programs. Speeches by leaders are not enough. It is essential to confront the past, but it is also essential to hold perpetrators accountable.

As an organization dedicated to genocide prevention and the promotion of accountability and justice, we urge Prime Minister Pashinyan to reconsider his statements and reaffirm Armenia’s commitment to pursuing justice for the Armenian Genocide.

The Lemkin Institute must underscore the fact that the threat to peace and security in the South Caucasus is not Armenia, but rather Azerbaijan and Turkey, both of which harbor pan-Turkic aspirations, continue to promote genocidal Armenophobia globally, and have shown no interest in demonstrating respect for Armenian identity, culture, or sovereignty. These leaders, and the publics they serve, should be the ones called upon to examine their social psychology in the name of creating peace.

It’s imperative for all leaders to stand firmly against genocide and its denial while working toward acknowledging historical truths to foster healing and prevent future atrocity crimes. It is harmful and unacceptable for the leader of a nation that has experienced genocide to engage in narratives crafted by perpetrators to deny their responsibility. Peace cannot be forged through lies, nor can genocidal states be assuaged by rhetorical capitulation. When leaders deny or downplay genocides, it sets a dangerous precedent that can embolden perpetrators and diminish the urgency of preventing future atrocities.

## At the Intersection: EBRD’s Yerevan Conference and Armenia’s Geopolitical Evolution

By Joseph Shahbazian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

In a convergence of geopolitical tides and economic discourse, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) orchestrated a seminal conference in Yerevan, Armenia from May 14 to 16. Against the backdrop of the partial removal of Russian troops from Armenian territory, this gathering served as a crucible for probing the intricate interplay between neoliberal economic doctrine, globalization imperatives, and the geopolitical chessboard of the South Caucasus region.

The EBRD, an institution ostensibly dedicated to fostering post-Soviet economies towards market-oriented reforms, found itself at a crossroads as delegates from across the globe convened to scrutinize its role in shaping economic development. While the bank has long espoused the virtues of neoliberal policies — deregulation, privatization, and marketization — the partial withdrawal of Russian troops cast a sobering light on the geopolitical undercurrents that inform its operations.

The EBRD, serving as a vanguard of neoliberal orthodoxy, has long championed these policies as pathways to economic prosperity and global integration. However, the event in Armenian territory provides a stark reminder of the geopolitical dimensions that underpin the EBRD’s operations.

Armenia, with its tumultuous history of Soviet influence and geopolitical maneuvering, provided a poignant backdrop for these deliberations. For decades, the presence of Russian troops on Armenian soil had been emblematic of the country’s strategic alignment with Moscow, a relationship that intersected with its economic trajectory in profound ways. As the troops

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# EBRD’s Yerevan Conference and Armenia’s Geopolitical Evolution

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withdrew, questions abounded about Armenia’s geopolitical recalibration and the implications for its relationship with regional power dynamics.

At the heart of the conference was a critical examination of neoliberalism — an economic ideology that has underpinned the EBRD’s operations since its inception. While proponents tout neoliberal policies as catalysts for economic growth and global integration, critics highlight their role in exacerbating inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly in transitioning economies like Armenia. The withdrawal of Russian troops served as a catalyst for reevaluating the balance between economic imperatives and geopolitical exigencies.

Moreover, the conference provided a platform for grappling with the complexities of globalization — a phenomenon propelled by institutions like the EBRD. While globalization promises economic interdependence and cross-border investment, its consequences are often unevenly distributed, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of economic dislocation. As Armenia contemplates its place in the global economy, the current events in the country raised questions about the country’s vulnerability to geopolitical shocks and the need for a more nuanced approach to economic development.

As the conference unfolded, divergent perspectives emerged on the path forward for Armenia. Some viewed the partial removal of Russian troops as an opportunity for the country to assert its sovereignty and diversify its economic partnerships. Others expressed concerns about Armenia’s geopolitical isolation and the potential repercussions for its economic stability. Against this backdrop, the EBRD found itself at a crossroads, grappling with the tension between its neoliberal mandate and the geopolitical realities of the region.

In the crucible of Yerevan, amidst the convergence of economic discourse and geopolitical realities, the EBRD conference served as a microcosm of the challenges facing Armenia and other transitioning economies.

As the country navigates the shifting sands of geopolitics and globalization, a landscape fraught with uncertainty, the lessons gleaned from the conference will serve as a testament to the interconnectedness of economic and geopolitical forces — forces that will shape the country’s future trajectory in ways both profound and unpredictable.

In this instance, the EBRD is extending a 236-million-euro loan to Armenia to fund various projects. However, it’s important to highlight that many of the EBRD’s ventures have earned a reputation as exemplars of “what can go wrong.” This case is no exception. Historically, EBRD projects have often proceeded without sufficient preparation to mitigate adverse effects on local communities, leading to significant environmental and social repercussions.

(Prof. Joseph Shahbazian is a physicist, medical engineer, author and inventor who lives in the Boston area and is the cofounder of the Shahbazian Foundation.)

## LETTERS

### Lemkin Institute Statement Condemns Prime Minister Pashinyan’s Cryptic Engagement with Genocide Denial

To the Editor:

The condemnation of the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention condemning not a comment by a Turkish leader, but the prime minister of Armenia, could not have caused more shame.

Indeed, the serious, world-renowned institution, based on Nikol Pashinyan’s declarations on April 24, directed serious accusation against him. The Lemkin Institute also accused Pashinyan’s political party member of parliament, Antranig Kocharyan, who last week demanded the preparation of a list with all the names of the victims. Neither mentioned the Genocide was perpetrated by Turkey. I would add that this parliamentary member was in charge of presenting the names of more than 5,000 victims and disappeared Armenians during the 44-Day War in 2020; he has yet to present his list.

The Lemkin Institute states that the prime minister’s statement is a denial of the Armenian Genocide. The current prince of Armenia could not naturally say much about the clear accusation, cannot say that the Institute is the fifth column against him nor can he accuse former presidents of Armenia of bribing the Lemkin Institute for the statement.

The analysis published by the Lemkin Institute is truly tragic for our nation; this Institute’s fundamental purpose is pointing out genocides and preventing genocides, and it suggested, that on April 24 the prime minister was abrogating the fundamentals of his obligations regarding the genocide.

If we make clearer the horror of the declaration, then, according to the analysis, the person in charge of the Armenian nation denies the fact of the Armenian Genocide, which not only is recognized by many countries of the world, but its denial is criminalized, thanks to the efforts of the Armenian Diaspora.

According to the definition of the Lemkin Institute, the consequences of denial of a genocide will make the crime of genocide a lasting crime, that is, an unfinished crime, and consequently a continuous genocide.

Finally, if we want to summarize the Lemkin Institute’s accusation, we conclude that Nikol Pashinyan, the Prime Minister of Armenia, participates to the still continuous genocide of the Armenian people.

Sevag Hagopian, editor  
Zartouk Daily  
Beirut



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