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Anti-Government Forces Overtake Most of Aleppo, As Armenian Non-Military Contingent Leaves

ALEPPO, Syria (Combined Sources) — In the past week rebels have taken control of the majority of Aleppo, and in the ensuing unrest, the body count is rising, including an Armenian dentist, who was shot and killed, according to the local *Kantsasar* Armenian-language newspaper. Yervand Arslanian, 66, was killed by a sniper while he was trying to leave Aleppo. He was taken to a hospital in Hama, but could not survive his injuries.

According to the UK-based monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), one rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, had led the attack on Syria's second largest city.

At least 277 people have been killed since the offensive started on November 30, the BBC reported.

Syrian authorities closed the Aleppo airport and all roads leading into the city on Saturday, Reuters reported, citing military sources.

Robert Ford, who was the last U.S. ambassador to Syria, said the attack showed that Syrian government forces are "extremely weak," the Associated Press reported. In some cases, he said, they appear to have "al-



Armenian demining units in Aleppo

most been routed," he said.

Video posted on a channel affiliated with the Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) appears to show rebel fighters in vehicles inside the city. BBC Verify has geolocated the footage to a western suburb of Aleppo.

Syria has been engulfed in an all-out civil war since 2011, with Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, becoming the site of a major siege lasting between 2012–2016, resulting in the Syrian regime successfully winning control of the city with Russian air support.

Help for Compatriots

Armenia's government is not in a position to help ethnic Armenian residents of Aleppo flee the northern Syrian city following its unexpected capture by Islamist rebels, an official in Yerevan acknowledged on Monday, December 2.

Aleppo was home to a majority of an estimated 80,000 ethnic Armenians who lived in Syria before the outbreak of its bloody civil war in 2011. The once thriving community is believed to have shrunk by more than half since then.

The current number of Syrian Armenians remaining in Aleppo is not known. According to some estimates, it may be as high as 10,000.

"Currently, people are in a state of waiting, they are cautious," Zarmig Boghigian, editor of *Kantsasar*, told RFE/RL's Armenian Service on Monday.

"There is approximately 12-14 hours of electricity a day," she said, adding that most shops are still open while local schools remain closed.

In Boghigian's words, the city has been rocked by airstrikes but there is no fighting in residential areas. One such strike, a

see SYRIA, page 5

Opposition Lawmakers Want Access to Draft Agreement With Azerbaijan

By Shoghik Galstian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun)

— Four opposition lawmakers have taken the Armenian government to court, challenging its decision to deny them confidential access to the text of a draft peace deal discussed by Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The government had reluctantly allowed them to read a copy of the document, marked "top secret," in December 2023. Without disclosing its provisions, the deputies representing the main opposition Hayastan alliance said afterwards that it only reinforced their concerns that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is planning further unilateral concessions to Baku without securing anything in return.

see ACCESS, page 3

Armenia to Reduce Housing Aid for Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees

By Ani Avetisyan

The Armenian government has announced it is scaling back a program that provides housing subsidies to refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, casting the decision as a move to promote self-sufficiency and stimulate the integration of refugees into society. But for the tens of thousands of Karabakh refugees receiving assistance, the announced reduction in benefits is likely to cause a spike in discontent.

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(Photo: armradio.am)



Anti-government fighters in Syria's northern city of Aleppo on November 30, 2024.

Mary Kouyoumdjian: A Composer Comes of Age

By Christopher Atamian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

NEW YORK — When asked to describe the type of music she writes Kouyoumdjian defers to answer, offering that she is simply "a composer and documentarian." Most would understand her music as a variant of classical or contemporary music, though not necessarily in the sense of Ravel or Debussy, although she grew up playing classical piano. Kouyoumdjian describes her compositions as "multimedia works that integrate live musical performance, electronic soundscapes and documentary components such as interviews and field recordings" and that she enthusiastically shares her admiration for the "structured chaos of the Beatles."

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(ALIK BARSOUMIAN PHOTO)

SOUTH AMERICA

AGBU President Simonian Visits South American Armenian Communities

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Mirror-Spectator Winter Break

The Armenian Mirror-Spectator will be closed for one week between Christmas and New Year.

The last issue of the year will be dated Saturday, December 28 and the first issue back will be dated Saturday, January 4.

The annual Christmas Greetings will appear in the last issue of the year.



ARMENIA

NEWS from ARMENIA

Parliament Speaker Meets Colombia Ambassador

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Speaker of Parliament Alen Simonyan met with the Ambassador of Colombia to Armenia Hector Isidro Arenas Neira on December 2.

Simonyan expressed hope that such meetings can contribute to the development of the Armenian-Colombian relationship, the parliament's press service said in a readout.

Neira thanked him for the meeting and expressed readiness to take steps to intensify the bilateral ties.

The two discussed also other issues of bilateral interest, particularly interparliamentary cooperation.

Report Puts Armenia Among World's Safest Countries

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Armenia has been named the 8th safest country in the world on November 27 by Numbeo, a crowd-sourced online database.

The Numbeo Safety Index placed Andorra first, the UAE second and Qatar third.

Armenia is in between Hong Kong (7th) and Japan (9th).

Georgia is 21st, Azerbaijan is 33rd, Turkey is 54th and Iran is 92nd.

Prosecutors Seek Seizure of Former Stepanavan Mayor's Assets

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — The Armenian Prosecutor General's Office announced on December 2 that it seeks to confiscate expensive property and other assets of former Stepanavan Mayor Sargis Gharakeshishyan.

Prosecutors have asked the Anti-Corruption Court to allow the forfeiture of a house in Yerevan, four properties in Stepanavan, four vehicles, shares in a company, two deposits worth 7 million drams and 215.5 million drams from the ex-mayor and his associates, accusing him of illicit enrichment.

Gharakeshishyan served as Stepanavan mayor from 2004 to 2012.

Dollar, Euro Exchange Rate Goes Up

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — The Central Bank of Armenia reported on December 2, the US dollar exchange rate up by 3.24 drams to 397.88 drams. The Euro exchange rate up by 1.83 drams to 418.65 drams. The Russian Ruble exchange rate up by 0.08 drams to 3.74 drams. GBP exchange rate up by 4.71 drams to 505.55 drams.

The Central Bank has set the following prices for precious metals.

Gold price up by 392.89 drams to 33912.60 drams. Silver price up by 11.26 drams to 392.72 drams.

Kocharyan Trial Judge Admits Past Links to Pashinyan's Party

By Naira Bulghadarian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — A 34-year-old judge presiding over the fresh trial of former President Robert Kocharyan admitted on November 28 that he was affiliated with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's party before taking the bench five months ago.

The judge, Sargis Petrosyan, downplayed that fact, saying that it does not make him biased against the top leader of the main opposition Hayastan alliance.

stitutional Court ruled that the accusation, rejected by them as politically motivated, is unconstitutional.

Prosecutors appealed against the acquittal, saying that they must be allowed to bring a different accusation also related to the events of March 2008, which left eight protesters and two police personnel dead. The Court of Cassation gave the green light for the new trial in September. Kocharyan again decried that "disgraceful" decision when he spoke to journalists after the latest session of the renewed trial.

Petrosyan acknowledged that he was a member of the party "for several months" and ran for parliament on his ticket in 2018, a few months before becoming a prosecutor.

"I have never held a political position," he said. "My inclusion [on a Pashinyan-led bloc's electoral list] was only meant to serve my legal expertise."

After being acquitted of the coup charge in 2022, Kocharyan continued to stand trial on a separate corruption charge. That trial ended without a verdict last December, with the ex-president invoking the statute of limitations that expired in May 2023.

Anna Danibekyan, the judge who presided over it, was controversially removed from the bench in July. Armenia's Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), which was headed until this week by a Pashinyan ally, Karen Andreasyan, accused Danibekyan of letting Kocharyan artificially drag out the court hearings.

Andreasyan was among six senior state officials who tendered resignation on November 18, three days after Pashinyan publicly lambasted Armenian courts and law-enforcement bodies for what he called a continuing lack of "justice" in the country. Pashinyan said on November 18 that he "asked" the SJC head to step down because he is unhappy with some of the decisions made by Armenian courts. The premier mentioned unspecified court cases "dragging on for years."

Opposition leaders and other critics say Andreasyan's effective ouster proved that the SJC, which is supposed to guarantee judicial independence, is in fact controlled by Pashinyan.



Former President Robert Kocharyan speaks during his renewed trial in Yerevan, November 28, 2024

Kocharyan, his former chief of staff Armen Gevorgyan and two retired army generals are being prosecuted again in connection with a 2008 post-election violence in Yerevan. They were cleared of "overthrow of the constitutional order" by another judge in April 2021 after Armenia's Con-

stitutional Court ruled that the accusation, rejected by them as politically motivated, is unconstitutional. During the court hearing, the ex-president and his lawyers demanded that Petrosyan recuse himself from the case because of his past links to the ruling Civil Contract party, which they said called into question his impartiality. The presiding judge rejected the demand.

Campaign against Gender-Based Violence Kicks off in Yerevan

YEREVAN (Jam News) — On November 25, Yerevan marked the start of a 16-day campaign aimed at combating gender-based violence, with various events planned throughout Armenia.

The opening event featured a discussion titled "Achievements, Needs, and Effective Partnerships to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Armenia." Labor and Social Affairs Minister Narek Mkrtychyan participated, highlighting that gender-based violence not only infringes on fundamental human rights but also destabilizes families and society, leaving a damaging legacy for future generations.

The campaign, initiated in 1991 by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University in the United States, is known as the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

Vassilis Maragos, Head of the EU Delegation to Armenia, emphasized the global scale of the issue, noting that one in three people worldwide experiences violence. He stressed that violence is not a private matter but a societal challenge:

"A society cannot prosper or progress when more than half its population faces violence, discrimination, or inequality."

In Armenia, around 10 women are killed each year by their husbands, former spouses, or partners. Alarming, only 12 percent of women who experience physical or sexual violence seek help, underscoring the persistent culture of silence surrounding the issue.

Challenging Stereotypes

An extended session of the thematic group on gender issues was held as part of the Promoting Human Rights Protection and Strengthening National Institutions program. The initiative is led by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UNICEF, with co-financing from the European Union.

Mkrtychyan emphasized that combating gender-based violence requires a multifaceted approach, addressing not only legal and social dimensions but also cultural norms. He pointed out that the issue touches on societal mindsets and collective stereotypes, making it impossible to tackle in isolation.

The minister underscored the vital role of various organizations and individuals involved in violence prevention, highlighting the importance of raising public awareness:

"Ongoing education will enable citizens to recognize the grave consequences of violence, ensuring that society neither accepts nor tolerates them."

Vassilis Maragos, Head of the EU Delegation to Armenia, agreed with this view:

"A sustained and united effort is essential to create an environment where domestic violence is entirely rejected, and gender inequality becomes a thing of the past. Achieving this requires both collaborative action and a strong legal framework."

Since 2020, the government has been providing assistance to victims of domestic violence, including financial support, said Mkrtychyan. He noted that there are plans to invest additional resources and enhance the quality of services offered:

"In 2022, 1,516 people accessed these services. In 2023, the figure rose to around 1,800, and so far this year, 1,600 individuals have sought help."

The minister highlighted that these figures point to a change in societal attitudes toward the issue. Gradually, addressing domestic violence is becoming a norm, with more people coming forward to report cases. He also believes this reflects increased public trust in both the government and NGOs.

Rising Violence Cases Spark Concern

A study by Armenia's Statistical Committee revealed that nearly one-third of surveyed women had experienced psychological violence, with an equal number reporting economic violence:

"One in seven women reported physical violence, while one in fifteen disclosed experiences of sexual violence."

In 2023, police registered 1,338 cases of domestic violence, issuing emergency intervention orders in 619 instances.

The Women's Support Centre hotline received 3,851 calls over the past year. The center provided assistance to 1,085 women and children affected by domestic violence, offering safe shelter to 265 women and their children.



ARMENIA

‘Wings of Tatev’ Named Best Cable Car in the World for The Third Time

MADERA, Portugal — The “Wings of Tatev” cable car has been named the World’s Best Cable Car at the prestigious World Travel Awards 2024 for the third time. This year, the Armenian cable car outperformed competitors from Bolivia, Brazil, Vietnam, Canada, New Zealand, the USA, and South Africa. Previously, “Wings of Tatev” brought Armenia victory in this category in 2023 and 2021.

The announcement of the award came on November 24 during the official ceremony in Madeira, Portugal. The World Travel Awards is considered one of the most prestigious awards in the travel and tourism industry, recognizing excellence in travel, tourism, and hospitality since 1993. Often referred to as the “Travel Oscar”, the award highlights the industry’s best projects for their pursuit of excellence, high service standards, and innovation.

“Receiving this prestigious award for the third time proves that Armenia boasts a unique world-class tourism infrastructure. On the one hand, it contributes to the development of the southern region; on the other, it showcases Armenia’s immense spiritual and cultural heritage to visitors from around the world.

For the second consecutive year, my father has been unable to personally accept this award or continue his philanthropic and humanitarian projects, as he is unlawfully detained in a Baku prison on fabricated charges. I am proud that his projects make Armenia known globally. I am confident he will realize many more groundbreaking projects in the future,” said David Vardanyan, the eldest son of Ruben Vardanyan.

Mariia Butenko, director of the “Wings of Tatev” cable car, emphasized the significance of this recognition for Armenia’s tourism development. “Winning the World Travel Awards again proves that this project, initiated



by Ruben Vardanyan, was not only well-conceived but continues to fully serve its purpose. It adds significant value to Armenia’s tourism appeal. Our primary goal is to introduce guests to Armenia, especially its stunning southern region, and provide them with truly unforgettable experiences. We hope this victory will attract many new visitors, revealing Tatev’s cultural and natural treasures to them,” she noted.

The “Wings of Tatev” was included in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest reversible passenger cable car in the world (5752 meters). Another notable achievement is the shortest construction period for such a large-scale engineering structure (10 months).

This year, the cable car marked its 14th anniversary, having welcomed more than 1,300,000 passengers since its opening. It has played a crucial role in developing tourism in Armenia, with one in five tourists visiting Tatev.

The “Wings of Tatev” project has also had a positive

impact on cultural and social improvements in Armenia’s southern region. It is part of the “Tatev Gateway” complex, a non-profit project, all profits from which are directed to the restoration of Tatev Monastery and the development of the local community. Thanks to the cable car, many visitors discovered Syunik and its historical heritage, while Tatev Monastery became more accessible. The project has created new jobs for locals, spurred economic growth, and encouraged infrastructure development and the establishment of small tourism businesses.

The “Wings of Tatev” project is part of “Tatev Revival program”, initiated by Ruben Vardanyan and Veronika Zonabend. The cable car was realized by the Austrian-Swiss company Doppelmayr/Garaventa, a leader in the field of ropeway construction. It undergoes annual inspections to meet international safety standards and is managed by Impulse Business Management.

Armenia to Reduce Housing Aid for Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees

AID, from page 1

Armenia since November 2023 has provided a monthly stipend of 50,000 drams (about \$125) to refugees from Karabakh without housing or government shelter. This assistance has supported most of the estimated 105,000 Armenians who fled Karabakh after Azerbaijan reconquered the entire region in September 2023.

Under a plan approved during a cabinet meeting in late November, subsidies will be scaled back starting in April 2025. Only children, college students, pensioners and individuals with disabilities — about 54,000 refugees, according to government estimates — will continue to receive aid. Payments for

eligible individuals will decrease to 40,000 drams in April and 30,000 drams by July. Working-age refugees who do not fall into these groups will lose benefits.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said the changes are intended to motivate refugees to seek employment or entrepreneurship opportunities. “We need to create conditions where people can support their families through their own work,” Pashinyan said.

The Armenian government is struggling to encourage Karabakh Armenians to apply for Armenian citizenship because doing so would cause them to lose temporary protection status as a refugee.

As of this November, only about 1,500 Karabakh residents have applied for citizenship, while over 90,000 have received temporary protection status as refugees. According to the country’s Labor Ministry, more than 25,000 refugees have already secured jobs or started businesses.

The reduction in allowances coincides with a government housing program launched last June. The initiative offers grants ranging from 2 to 5 million drams (\$5,000-\$13,000) per person, including children, to refugees who purchase or build homes, primarily in rural areas. The program is part of a broader effort to address housing shortages and depopulation in these regions.

Refugees and advocacy groups have criticized the program, arguing that the grants fall short of covering rising property prices, even in rural areas. The amounts provided by the government are not enough to buy or build even small houses in many regions of the country. Critics also point to inadequate infrastructure and limited job opportunities in rural locations as barriers to participation.

Officials have long faced pushback over strategies concerning Karabakh, pre-dating the total loss of the territory to Azerbaijan. Artak Beglaryan, a former top Karabakh official, accused the government of lacking a clear strategy for supporting refugees. He cautioned that government policies, instead of promoting integration, may end up stimulating emigration.

Armenia has allocated more than 75 billion drams (\$190 million) for the support of the refugees since September 2023, with nearly 90 percent of funding coming from the state budget. The revised aid program is projected to cost 30.5 billion drams (\$78 million) in 2025. Armenian officials have applied to international organizations and Western states for aid to tackle the refugee crisis.

Government officials defend the shift, arguing that it prioritizes aid for vulnerable groups while fostering economic independence. However, housing shortages, rising rents, and limited employment opportunities remain significant hurdles for many refugees trying to integrate.

(This article originally appeared on Eurasianet.org on December 2.)

Opposition Lawmakers Want Access to Draft Agreement With Azerbaijan

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Pashinyan responded by saying that they will no longer have access to the draft treaty which he hoped to negotiate before the end of this year. Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan signed a relevant order in March. Mirzoyan’s press office implicitly accused the Armenian opposition of undermining the negotiation process and making “wrong and arbitrary public interpretations of the document.”

The Hayastan lawmakers announced on Monday, December 2, that they have asked a Yerevan court to overturn that decision. One of them, Artur Khachatryan, dismissed the official justification of the ban as “pathetic.”

“We acted within the law,” Khachatryan told journalists. “Otherwise, I would be facing criminal prosecution at the very least.”

“We made a political assessment that the piece of paper circulated between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministries is a capitulation agreement ... posing a threat to Armenia’s territorial integrity,” he said.

Baku and Yerevan have said in recent months that they now disagree on only a couple of provisions of the draft treaty. Pashinyan proposed in late August that they sign an interim agreement that would leave out those unpublicized sticking points. The Azerbaijani side rejected

the proposal.

It appears to have also ignored Pashinyan’s subsequent offer to hold “intensive” talks and bridge the remaining differences ahead of the COP29 climate summit held in Baku last month. Mirzoyan and other Armenian officials have claimed that Azerbaijan may invade Armenia after the summit.

Pashinyan’s domestic critics say he is desperate to secure an incomplete peace deal in hopes of misleading Armenians and increasing his chances of holding on to power. They also maintain that Azerbaijan has no intention to make peace with Armenia before clinching more far-reaching concessions from Pashinyan.



INTERNATIONAL

Herodotus' Theory on Armenian Origins Debunked By First Whole-Genome Study at Trinity College

DUBLIN (Trinity College Dublin) — Armenians, a population in Western Asia historically inhabiting the Armenian highlands, were long believed to be descendants of Phrygian settlers from the Balkans.

This “Balkan Theory” originated largely from the accounts of the Greek historian Herodotus, who observed that Armenians were armed in Phrygian fashion when serving in the Persian army.

Linguists further supported this theory, suggesting that the Armenian language shares ties with the Thracian-Phrygian subgroup of Indo-European languages.

But the first whole-genome study is challenging this long-held belief, revealing no significant genetic link between Armenians and the populations in the Balkan region. The study compares newly generated modern Armenian genomes and published genetic data of ancient individuals from the Armenian highlands with both modern and ancient genomes from the Balkans.

“For centuries, historical beliefs have shaped our understanding of the past, often leading us to accept theories as truth,” said Dr. Anahit Hovhannisyanyan, Marie Curie Fellow in Trinity College Dublin’s School of Genetics and Microbiology, and first author of the just-published study in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*.

“However, with the availability of whole genome sequencing and the advancement of ancient DNA research, we can now question and reframe these long-held ideas,

revealing a much more nuanced and scientifically grounded view of the history of human populations.”

The researchers behind the new study also disproved another belief — claims of an Assyrian ancestry for the Sasun, an

many historical sources, including the Bible, in cuneiform texts, and local traditional stories. Instead, they found that the Sasun had experienced a significant contraction in size in the recent past, which sets them apart from other populations.



A proposed route of Armenian migration according to the Balkan theory

Armenian population that inhabited the southern part of the Armenian highlands (modern-day southeastern Turkey).

This connection had been referenced in

“While checking for genetic continuity in the Armenian highlands, we found a genetic input into the region from a source linked to Neolithic Levantine farmers at

some point after the Early Bronze Age. In terms of timing and genetic ancestry, this aligns with previous findings in adjacent regions, thus allowing us to conclude that there was a large-scale post-Early Bronze Age movement across the Middle East,” said Andrea Manica, professor at the University of Cambridge, who is the last and co-senior author in the publication.

“The questions of exactly where and when it came from, as well as what triggered such a widespread migration wave, remain unanswered and yet to be studied.”

The researchers also shed light on the population structure and genetic variation of different Armenian groups, finding that populations from the eastern, western, and central parts of the Armenian highlands show a relatively high level of similarity.

“This is the first study attempting to draw the genetic atlas of the Armenian highlands,” said Levon Yepiskoposyan, Professor at the Institute of Molecular Biology, NAS RA, and co-senior author of the publication.

This research was mainly supported by the European Research Council, the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia; Marie Curie Individual Fellowship, the ESF DoRa PROGRAMME; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; Foundation for Armenian Science and Technology (FAST).

The journal article can be read on the publisher’s website.

5,000 Missing, Including 1,000 Armenians, in Karabakh conflict: ICRC

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — The issue of the missing persons of the Karabakh conflict is among the priorities of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), ICRC Armenia Communications and Prevention Manager Zara Amatuni said on December 2.

Amatuni made the remarks when asked about the work as part of the ICRC functions in the direction of determining the fate of the missing persons.

“We have been dealing with this issue in relation to the Karabakh conflict in the region for over thirty years. This means

we work in various directions. First of all, this is about the law guaranteed by the mandate pertaining not to ICRC obligations but to giving answers to the families of those missing by the authorities in relevant sides, as to what happened to their relatives in relation to the hostilities. This is the requirement of international humanitarian law. We are working in this direction with the authorities of the sides, in order to remind them about their obligations within the framework of the mandate, and to maximally support with our technical experience and certain skills that we have

acquired during our work in similar situations,” Amatuni said.

Amatuni said the second important direction of the ICRC work is to provide maximally comprehensive and detailed information about each and every missing person.

“Based on the applications of the families, we collected through our offices in the region the data of around five thousand missing persons who are considered missing since the 90s, and subsequently as a result of escalations of the conflict from 2020 until 2023. Around 1,000 of them are

Armenians, whose data was collected by the ICRC through the offices in Yerevan and Karabakh. This number includes persons whose families consider them missing despite the existence of a positive DNA identification: there are families who do not accept the test results for various reasons. This is also a signal for us to work with authorities to try and determine the circumstances behind people not accepting these results,” Amatuni said, emphasizing that the ICRC does not independently carry out the identification process and the relevant authorities are in charge of it.

“We are mostly conveying our experience. For example, by closely cooperating with the laboratory of the forensic expertise center, our experts in Armenia try to increase capacity through equipment, lectures and exchange of experience, in order to maximally support the high-level professionalism in this sector, and in turn this will contribute to drastic decrease of disappearances in emergency situations,” Amatuni said.

Regarding the search process of those missing, he said the steps and decisions around it are up to the authorities, while the ICRC, as a neutral mediator, is ready to support.

“In our view, a certain humanitarian atmosphere must be created that would allow the sides to have relevant steps together, for example, map the possible locations of burials if the given case pertains to persons about whom some information is available. Naturally, we are always keeping this issue active, discussing it with the authorities and working with families, but the actions themselves and decisions are not up to us. We are ready to work with the sides as a neutral mediator,” he concluded.

Striking Bus Drivers Fired by Yerevan Municipality

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Yerevan’s municipal administration fired 18 drivers of public buses on Tuesday, December 3, just hours after they and dozens of their colleagues went on strike to demand higher pay.

The strike practically paralyzed the municipal transport system, leaving tens of thousands of commuters stranded at bus stops across the city. It came amid the ongoing introduction of a new electronic ticketing system which officials say will prevent drivers and other employees of a municipal transport company from pocketing bus fares.

The drivers have already been banned from accepting any cash from their passengers. They say that the municipality has broken a pledge to raise their monthly wages by 100,000-150,000 drams (\$260-\$385).

“They promised to raise our wages but they haven’t,” one of the striking drivers told RFE/RL’s Armenian Service.

Another said Mayor Tigran Avinyan’s

office offered instead to pay the drivers 700 drams (\$1.80) for every hour of overtime work. They already have to work for more than 12 hours a day, he claimed.

The authorities were quick to reject their demands and rule out any negotiations with them.

“We will not give in to any kind of blackmail, we will not compromise,” Avinyan wrote on Facebook. “The organizers [of the strike] will be held strictly accountable.”

Avinyan’s office announced the sackings shortly afterwards. It said the strike action is illegal because the drivers started it without prior notice and caused “financial damage” to the transport system. One of Avinyan’s deputies, Suren Grigoryan, said he has also asked prosecutors to launch criminal proceedings against them.

The sackings were strongly condemned by opposition figures and legal experts. Arman Tatoyan, a former human rights ombudsman, said the drivers are illegally pun-

ished and “terrorized” for exercising their constitutional rights.

The new ticketing system, which will fully take effect on January 1, will also lead to a significant increase in transport fees. Opposition members of Yerevan’s municipal council have been campaigning against the measure. They have dismissed as insufficient price discounts introduced last month for various categories of the population, including children, university students and pensioners.

Bus and minibus fees in the Armenian capital have stood at 100 drams (25 cents) per ride for over two decades. They will be replaced with a complex tariff system involving electronic payments for season tickets. Commuters will have to pay 8,800 drams (\$22) per month, 23,600 drams per quarter and 88,000 drams per annum for an unlimited number of bus, trolleybus or metro rides. A one-way ticket will cost around 300 drams.



INTERNATIONAL

Anti-Government Forces Overtake Most of Aleppo

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pparently carried out by Russian or Syrian government warplanes, blew out the windows of her apartment.

In Yerevan, the Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs said, meanwhile, that evacuating Aleppo Armenians to Armenia is impossible in these circumstances.

“Right now, even [Syrian] government forces have no access to Aleppo, and the possibility of evacuation is almost non-existent,” said Hovannes Aleksanian, a spokeswoman for the Armenian government agency.

Aleksanian added that Yerevan will respond if the Armenian Embassy in Damascus and the Syrian government “see such a possibility at some point.”

Armenia also had a consulate in Aleppo until the rebel takeover. According to the Armenian Foreign Ministry, the consul, Ara Avetisian, traveled to Damascus on November 26, the day before the lightning offensive launched by the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and was unable to return to Aleppo due to the fighting.

Just as the Turkish-backed rebels entered the city on Friday, the Armenian military evacuated a small contingent of its sappers, medics and other noncombat personnel deployed in and around Aleppo since 2019.

Non-Combat Contingent from Armenia

The Armenian military evacuated its small non-combat contingent from Aleppo

late on Friday, November 29, as Islamist rebels entered the city.

“This escalation made it impossible for the Armenian humanitarian demining and medical team, which has been conducting its mission in the Aleppo region since 2019, to continue its activities,” read a statement released by the Defense Ministry in Yerevan earlier in the day.

“In light of these developments, a decision was made to temporarily suspend the team’s operations in Aleppo,” the statement said, adding that the Armenian military personnel were flown back to Armenia the previous night.

Yerevan deployed, with Russia’s support and encouragement, more than 80 demining specialists, army medics and other servicemen tasked with protecting them to the Aleppo region in 2019, prompting criticism from the United States. It did not end this “humanitarian” mission during and after the 2020 war with Azerbaijan that resulted in serious security challenges to Armenia.

Armenia was one of the few countries that did not cut ties with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime and maintained functioning diplomatic missions in Damascus and Aleppo throughout the civil war.

Upon its deployment in 2019, the Defense Ministry said that the mission would operate exclusively in regions devoid of military operations.

The ministry cited several UN General

Assembly resolutions regarding Syria, a written request by Syrian authorities, and Aleppo’s Armenian community as the driving factors behind the mission.

The logistics of the mission were announced to be carried out with assistance from Russia, the Syrian regime’s biggest ally.

Russia’s then-Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu praised Armenia’s decision to send the mission, saying that Armenia was “the first to respond to our calls to help the Syrian people.”

According to Armenian officials, Ankara recruited thousands of Syrian mercenaries in Idlib and sent them to fight on Azerbaijan’s side in the Nagorno-Karabakh war that broke out in September 2020. The Armenian claims were backed by France and, implicitly, Russia.

Also, multiple reports by Western media quoted members of Islamist groups in the rebel-held province as saying in September and October 2020 that they are deploying to Azerbaijan in coordination with the Turkish government. Turkey and Azerbaijan denied the presence of any foreign mercenaries in the Azerbaijani army ranks.

Two Syrian men were captured by Karabakh Armenian forces during the fighting. An Armenian court sentenced them to life imprisonment in May 2021.

(Material from *Kantsasar*, Azatutyun, News.am, Armenpress and OC Media were used to compile this report.)

Turkey Removes Another Kurdish Mayor From Office

STOCKHOLM (Stockholm Center for Freedom) — The Turkish Interior Ministry, which has recently increased its pressure on opposition-run municipalities, has removed another Kurdish mayor from his post due to his conviction in a terror-related trial, [Turkish Minute](#) reported.

The ministry announced on Friday, November 29, the removal of Ayvaz Hazır, the co-mayor of Bahçesaray district in the eastern province of Van from office following a court ruling against him. Hazır, who was elected from the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) in the local elections of March 31, has been replaced by the district governor, Harun Arslanargun.

The ministry’s move came on the same day that Hazır was convicted of “committing a crime on behalf of a terrorist organization” and sentenced to three years and 11 months in prison. He was removed from office just hours later on Friday.

Hazır denounced the ministry’s decision as being politically motivated, claiming that he would have been acquitted if he had not been a co-mayor from the DEM Party.

He told the Mezopotamya news agency that judges made the decision against him not independently but as a result of government pressure and coercion.

Hazır was originally accused in a case filed on December 24, 2015. The charges related to his participation in an event where he allegedly called for self-rule for Kurds. According to Hazır, however, he was merely working in the municipality’s press unit at the time and was sent by the then-mayor to photograph the event in question.

“It’s very telling that this sentence was handed down so long after the case was initiated, during my tenure as mayor,” he said.

While specific affiliations were not detailed, such charges often pertain to an alleged connection with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey and its Western allies.

The decision has sparked criticism, with some observers pointing to the political dynamics of Bahçesaray. The district had been governed by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) for years until Hazır and his co-mayor, Nebahat Benek, won the 2019 local elections as DEM Party candidates. Hazır narrowly defeated the AKP candidate, Remzi Orhan, receiving 21.33 percent of the vote compared with Orhan’s 21.18 percent on March 31. The AKP contested the election results twice, but recounts confirmed the DEM Party victory.

Hazır’s sentence and his subsequent removal from office add to growing concerns about judicial actions targeting opposition figures in Turkey. His case follows a pattern of legal challenges against pro-Kurdish politicians, often accused of links to terrorist groups. Critics argue that such cases undermine democratic governance and disproportionately affect opposition-held municipalities.

The DEM Party has launched protests following Hazır’s dismissal from office, with party members, co-mayors, and municipal council members staging a vigil outside the municipal hall. They also organized a protest march over the weekend.

Removal of Mayors after March 31

The AKP government has taken over several municipalities controlled by the DEM Party and the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) following the local elections on March 31, citing terrorism-related court ruling and ongoing investiga-

tions into them.

The first mayor that the government removed from office this year was Mehmet Siddik Akış of Hakkari province in southeastern Turkey from the DEM Party on June 4 due to “terrorism” charges against the mayor.

On October 31, the Interior Ministry replaced the mayor of İstanbul’s Esenyurt district, run by the CHP, citing a “terrorism” investigation into the mayor. This was followed on November 4 by the removal of the mayors of the cities of Mardin and Batman, and Şanlıurfa’s Halfeti district, all run by DEM Party, due to ongoing “terrorism-related” criminal cases against them. The ministry has appointed governors and district governors as trustees in place of the elected mayors.

Turkey became well acquainted with the removal of democratically elected Kurdish mayors from office on terrorism accusations after the local elections in 2016 and 2019, but there were hopes that the government would not resort to such a step this time, given the significant public support afforded DEM Party mayors in the country’s south-east in the local elections.

As a result, the recent removal of mayors has come as a disappointment to many, leading to protests and calls on the government from various segments of society to end the controversial practice and respect the will of the Kurdish people and government opponents.

In earlier appointments of trustees, the Turkish government claimed the removal of Kurdish mayors was a counterterrorism measure and that the elected mayors were funneling municipal funds to the PKK.

The mayors denied the accusations and described them as politically motivated.

INTERNATIONAL

Armenia, Finland Discuss Relations with EU, Regional Matters

HELSINKI (PanARMENIAN.Net) — On November 28, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan had a meeting with the President of Finland Alexander Stubb.

The two discussed possible directions for deepening cooperation between Armenia and Finland. Both emphasized that strong respect for democratic values, mutual interest in enhancing cooperation in sectors with high potential for development as well as the expanding ties between Armenia and the European Union play a significant role in strengthening bilateral political dialogue.

The two also exchanged views on regional issues as well.

Mirzoyan emphasized that establishing lasting peace in the South Caucasus and ensuring a more secure environment for the citizens of Armenia are among the main priorities of the nation’s foreign policy. Mirzoyan added that Armenia has expressed strong political will regarding the signing of the peace treaty with Azerbaijan, and presented the latest developments in the process.

Hotline at Armenian Embassy in Damascus

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Currently there is no opportunity to organize an evacuation of Armenians in Syria, the Embassy of Armenia in Syria said on December 3.

Its statement added that the Foreign Ministry is closely following the situation and all options will be considered in the event of an opportunity of evacuation.

The embassy is open and maintains contact with Armenian citizens and Syrian authorities.

The Consul General of Armenia in Aleppo is now stationed in Damascus, where he arrived last week for a meeting in the Syrian Foreign Ministry and was unable to return.

The consul general and the consular department of the Armenian embassy are open and work in an emergency mode.

The embassy hotline is available at +963960003622.

US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Announces Retirement

BAKU (Public Radio of Armenia) — US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mark Libby this week announced his retirement from US diplomatic service. The Ambassador says the health concerns he noted in his testimony before the US Senate in 2023 have persisted.

“A recent test results indicate that it is time for me to return home to focus fully on my health. So I will retire shortly after we finish out this exceptionally busy — but exceptionally successful — 2024 calendar year. I intend to use my remaining few weeks in Azerbaijan to set the stage for a successful 2025 and to promote cancer awareness,” Libby said in a statement.



INTERNATIONAL

Azerbaijan Slams Polish President Over Armenia Border Patrol

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry on December 2 condemned Poland's President Andrzej Duda for visiting Armenia's border with Azerbaijan and monitoring the ceasefire regime there together with European Union observers.

Duda met with Polish members of the EU monitoring mission (EUMA) and joined them on a border patrol, conducted at a border section 75 kilometers south of Yerevan, at the end of his official visit to Armenia on Wednesday. According to a statement by his office, he "familiarized himself with the situation" in the area and praised the EUMA, saying that it has succeeded in "calming down the situation" along the more than 1,000-kilometer-long frontier.

"He indicated that talks are underway on Poland's greater involvement in this undertaking through an increase in the number of Polish representatives," added the statement.

During his talks with Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturian and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Duda offered to help Armenia and Azerbaijan end their long-running conflict. The Polish leader visited Baku earlier this month to take part in the COP29 climate summit.

The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry on November 28 summoned the Polish charge d'affaires in Baku and handed him a note of protest against what it called Duda's "provocation" and "participation in anti-Azerbaijani propaganda." In a separate statement, the ministry accused him of undermining Azerbaijan's "strategic partnership" with Poland.

Baku has been very critical of the EU mission ever since its launch in February 2023. In October this year, a top Azerbaijani general accused it of "escalating the situation in the South Caucasus."

The EUMA is tasked with preventing or reducing ceasefire violations. The EU decided late last year to increase the number of its members from 138 to 209. Armenian officials have repeatedly described the mis-



European Union monitors patrol Armenia's border with Azerbaijan, February 20, 2023.

sion as a success.

Pashinyan confirmed late last week reports that Baku is demanding the withdrawal of the EU monitors during ongoing negotiations on an Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty. He said the Armenian side has made a "counterproposal" to remove them from only demarcated border sections.

The mission's two-year mandate ends in February 2025. It is still not clear whether Yerevan will ask the EU to extend it.

Pashinyan's government requested the EU deployment after accusing Russia and ex-Soviet allies of refusing to defend Armenia against Azerbaijani attacks in 2022. Moscow has also opposed the mission, saying that it is part of US and EU efforts to drive Russia out of the South Caucasus. It has repeatedly accused the EU monitors of spying on Russian troops stationed in Armenia.



Polish President Andrzej Duda (right) talks to EU monitors on Armenia's border with Azerbaijan, November 27, 2024. (Photo by the Chancellery of the President of Poland)

Sinking Russia and Azerbaijanis Struggling to Stay Afloat

BAKU (JAM News) — The aggressive war against Ukraine, now nearing three years, and Western sanctions have finally begun to cause serious problems for Russia's economy. Statistics show that the worsening economic situation of the northern neighbor is also affecting Azerbaijan.

In October this year, the Central Bank of Russia announced it had raised the interest rate to a 20-year high of 21 percent. This marked the third consecutive rate hike within the year. The rate increase drives up borrowing costs for businesses and households, which in turn slows economic growth and contributes to rising inflation.

In early November, Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina admitted she had been forced to adopt a tight monetary policy, describing it as a new reality for the Russian economy.

Last week, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on Gazprombank, DOM.RF Bank, and 10 other Russian banks. Following this, the UK and several European countries announced new restrictions targeting Russian financial institutions, which had an immediate impact on the ruble's exchange rate. The sanctions prohibit foreign banks from servicing cards issued by Gazprombank under the Chinese payment system.

On November 28, the dollar's exchange rate on the international Forex market rose

to 110 rubles, reaching its highest level since March 2022. The euro and yuan rates also increased, reaching 120 rubles and 14.5 rubles, respectively.

Russia is allocating massive resources to win the war against Ukraine. Under sanctions, covering these expenses is becoming increasingly difficult, leading to a significant budget deficit. Notably, Russia's 2025 state budget projects defense spending at a historic high of 13.2 trillion rubles, or approximately \$142 billion. This amount is nearly double what was allocated in 2024. Consequently, military expenditures are expected to account for 6.2 percent of Russia's GDP next year.

Defense and security expenses alone are projected to make up nearly 40 percent of Russia's total budget in 2025, surpassing combined allocations for education, healthcare, social policy, and the national economy.

The worsening economic and social situation in Russia is affecting millions of Azerbaijanis who live and work in the country, as well as those in Azerbaijan who rely on income from their relatives in Russia.

Ismail Mamedzade, a fruit and vegetable trader in Moscow, told the Azerbaijani outlet PressKlub that the situation has deteriorated even compared to the previous year:

"People's purchasing power has de-

creased, and expenses for food, services, transportation, and logistics have risen. In addition, new laws targeting migrants have been introduced, and strict controls are in place. The number of documents required for work permits has increased, along with the associated fees. Many people cannot overcome these obstacles."

Mamedzade says that migrants face lengthy and thorough checks at Russian airports. Those allowed entry are reportedly monitored, while individuals with Russian citizenship are allegedly forced to join the army and fight:

"For those who refuse, their passports are marked for deportation, and they are expelled from the country. The treatment of migrants has become very strict. As a result, the number of migrants leaving Russia, including Azerbaijanis, is growing daily. Many are deterred by Azerbaijan's closed land borders, as airfare is prohibitively expensive. Many Azerbaijani families are working in Russia, and returning home is a significant financial burden for them."

He says one of the factors making work and earnings in Russia less effective is the devaluation of the ruble. According to him, incomes have already decreased, and they lose part of their value when exchanging rubles for manats: "Last week, I exchanged 1,000 rubles for 15.7 manats when sending

money to my family. You know how high food prices are in Azerbaijan — how much money would we have to earn monthly for our families to afford groceries there?! It's very difficult."

Money Transfers to Azerbaijan Decrease

According to the Central Bank, from January to September 2024, Azerbaijani banks received 29.3 percent less money from foreign countries through fast money transfer systems, while transfers from Azerbaijani banks abroad decreased by 15.4 percent.

Experts view this decline as a key indicator of the impact of Russia's worsening economic situation on Azerbaijanis.

The deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the neighboring country is bad news not only for Azerbaijanis working in Russia but also for Azerbaijani farmers and entrepreneurs. Their incomes depend on Russia, and their farms survive thanks to the currency earned from selling their products there.

Although the government does not provide any statistics on this matter, observations indicate that livelihoods in Azerbaijan's regions are largely supported by income earned in Russia. Consequently, the worsening economic situation in Russia next year is expected to further reduce the flow of money into households in Azerbaijan.



Community News

Armenia Fund USA Announces \$7.7 Million Raised at the 27th Annual Thanksgiving Day Telethon

LOS ANGELES — Armenia Fund's 27th Annual International Thanksgiving Day Telethon showcased vital programs successfully accomplished in Armenia over the past year. From housing for the displaced families, to hospitals in border villages, youth assistance centers and athletic and mental health programs for the wounded soldiers, Armenia Fund was able to help alleviate the hardships endured by the most vulnerable in the homeland.

Through a year-round sustained fundraising effort culminating in the annual Thanksgiving Day Telethon, Armenia Fund generated over \$7.7 million in 2024, to fund the programs that will change lives, bring hope and transform communities. In 2025, Armenia Fund is committed to expanding its efforts in key areas, including educational opportunities for the youth, preservation of Armenian cultural heritage, improved health services, and the development of athletic programs. The Artsakh Cultural Center in Gyumri, will be Armenia Fund's 2025 flagship project where artisans specializing in the traditional art of Artsakh carpet-weaving will live, work and exhibit their work in a lively community environment.

"On behalf of Armenia Fund, I am deeply grateful to all those who contributed throughout the year and during the telethon to support the vital work we do in Armenia," said Maria Mehranian, President of Armenia Fund. "The funds raised will directly impact the lives of countless Armenians, helping provide critical resources to build a brighter future. While we continue to celebrate our past successes, in the coming year, we will expand our efforts on new initiatives focused on the key areas of education, arts and culture, health and athletics in Armenia. The continued support of our community is vital as we work to strengthen Armenia's future" said Mehranian.

The telethon, broadcast live from 2 to 6 p.m. PST on November 28, was streamed globally on Armenia Fund's website and aired on platforms including YouTube (ArmeniaFundUS), First Channel America (H1), Horizon TV, AABC TV, Facebook, X, and Instagram. Notable civic leaders and television personalities, including longtime telethon supporters Kev Orkian and Ellina Abovian, participated, energizing the program and celebrating the unwavering commitment of Armenian-Americans to the betterment of Armenia.

The telethon remains a crucial part of Armenia Fund's annual fundraising efforts. While the event has concluded, donations are welcome year-round through the Armenia Fund website, where supporters can contribute to ongoing relief and development projects in Armenia.

For more information or to make a donation, visit www.armeniafund.org.



South America Trip: São Paulo. 7 11. 2024: Delegation at welcome lunch with Armenia's Youth Chess Team, São Paulo

AGBU President Simonian Visits South American Armenian Communities to Strengthen Ties

NEW YORK — On November 12, the newly installed president of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) Sam Simonian completed a nine-day landmark tour of key cities in South America, reinforcing the organization's mission to foster cultural, educational, and social development across the AGBU global network. The tour was the first leg of what will be a year-long itinerary of in-person visits with select AGBU chapters and entities worldwide.

Visits took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Montevideo, Uruguay, and São Paulo, Brazil where Simonian met with a host of local and national leaders, accompanied by his delegation, including Sylva Simonian, new AGBU Council of Trustees member Elie Akilian, AGBU Central Board member Lena Sarkissian, AGBU Strategic Advisory Council member Sevahn Simonian, and AGBU Young Professionals (YP) Manager Christina Lalama.

Before embarking on the trip, Simonian explained: "Following the best practices of AGBU leadership, I am eager to establish in-person touchpoints with our AGBU local communities — to listen, learn and get to know them in their own environment. This will help better acquaint me with the challenges and opportunities of this region, as we look ahead to the future. I also want to reassure the local leaders that AGBU's global leadership is in their corner, not only to help them reach their local goals but also to help them fulfill our strategic vision for the organization worldwide. This is a good time to align ourselves with the broader movements and major trends in society and reset AGBU priorities accordingly."

Argentina Visit

In Buenos Aires, Simonian was welcomed by Argentine government officials and members of the Armenian community, where he reaffirmed the importance of local cultural programs, Armenian schools, and youth engagement activities. He also commended the community for its resilience, dedication, and active contributions to Armenian identity.

see AGBU, page 10



South America Trip: Buenos Aires, Nov. 2. 2024: Sam Simonian with youth from Liga de Jóvenes and General Antranik Scouts at AGBU Center, Buenos Aires

Sister Churches Show Solidarity Through Prayer

NEW YORK — In response to Catholicos Karekin II's appeal, prayers for Armenia and Artsakh rang out on Sunday, November 10, from Holy Echmiadzin to the every Armenian Church jurisdiction around the world. But His Holiness' plea was also taken up by the global ecumenical community, and by numerous sister Christian communities.

In a solemn service in Geneva, Switzerland, the World Council of Churches (WCC) called for the unconditional release of 23 Armenian war hostages, as well as of human rights activists and journalists detained in Azeri jails. WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay delivered that message in Geneva's historic St. Pierre Cathedral.

Earlier, thanks to the efforts of Archbishop Vicken Aykazian (the Eastern Diocese's Ecumenical Director, and an influential figure on the world ecumenical stage), the [World Council of Churches](#) had invited member churches around the globe



WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay at St. Pierre Cathedral (Photo by Ivars Kupcis)

to pray on November 10 in support of Armenia and its people: for peace, for support of refugees, and for the release of the war hostages.

In the United States, the National Council of Churches sent a bulletin to its 37 member communions, representing some 35 million people in 100,000 congregations in the U.S., urging church leaders, pastors and congregations to join their voices to the worldwide prayer. The NCC cited Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan's message to Diocese leaders, adding: "Our Armenian Christian sisters and brothers worldwide will be fortified by the solidarity reflected in our prayers for them."

In Armenia, during the Prayer for Captives at the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, the Catholicos of All Armenians acknowledged the international show of solidarity in his homily. "We note with gratitude," His Holiness Karekin II said, "that today, through the efforts of the World Council of Churches and global interchurch institutions, our Christian sisters and brothers across the world are also raising prayers to release the captives, and to protect the rights of Artsakh's exiled Armenians."

He went on: "Thank you for answering our plea, and for lending your commitment to this cause, out of your heartfelt concern for the Armenian people."



COMMUNITY NEWS

In Tribute: My Favorite Town, Fresno

By William Saroyan, 1952

As told by William Saroyan:

Well, I was born there, if that helps, for birth is into the world, into the unresolved and unresolvable universe, into the entire dynamic mystery of living matter, and not into a town. Still, one soon hears about the specific place of beginning, even if one is no longer there or the place has changed, and so it must mean something to know where one was born.

One even knows the street, sometimes even the house.

The street was H, the 8th letter of the alphabet, the year, 1908, the month August, the day the 31st. H for Home, no doubt. I haunted the street, on purpose and by accident for years, but I never saw the house. It was gone by the time I was looking in earnest; in its place was a warehouse, then a garage, then a hotel, and finally a parking lot.

But neither street nor house ever made the town my favorite, nor the fact that I began in the town; it was something else.

What was it?

I discovered the human race there. I discovered art there. And wherever you discover helpless man and his high hope, that is your place, or not. What is his hope? His hope is for meaning, for meaning is everything; anything; and he achieves meaning, inventing it or discovering it, through art.

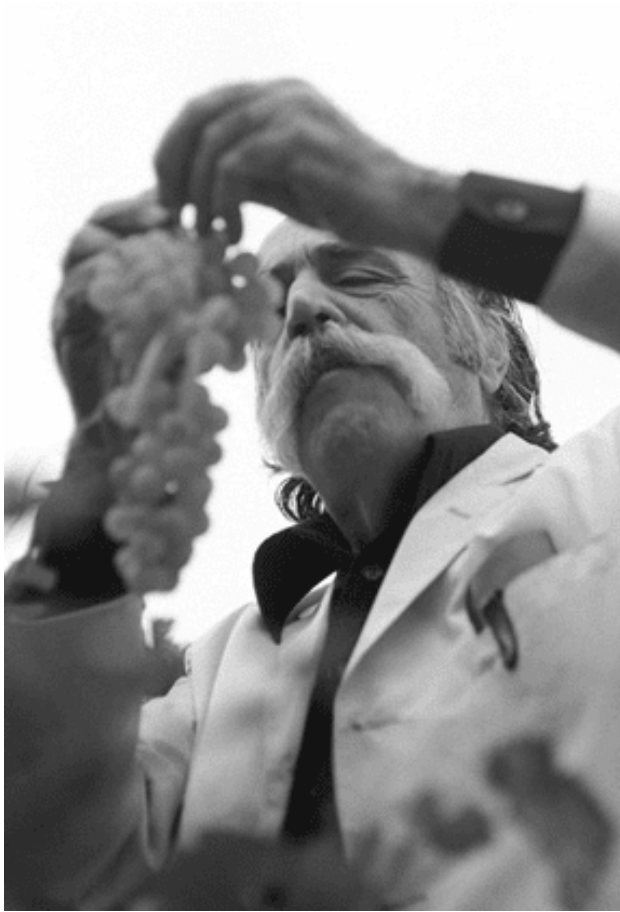
Who was the human race I discovered in Fresno? It was my family, my neighbors, my friends, the teachers at school, the classmates, the strangers in the streets, and myself; most of all myself and the strangers which were not strangers, which could not be strangers because I saw



Helen Minasian (cousin), Archie Minasian (cousin), William Saroyan, Kirk Minasian (cousin), 1920s, Fresno. William and his cousins posing in Fresno.

them, recognized them, knew them. Were the strangers any good at all? Was it possible to believe in them at all? They were good: good and hopeless; and that is why I discovered art, for I was glad they were good, and angry that they were hopeless, for I didn't want them to be hopeless. If they were hopeless, then of course so was I, and I didn't want to be hopeless.

My mother's cousin, Hovagim Saroyan, dead thirty-five years now, was the human race. He had a vineyard of thirty acres of Muscats in Goshen, a railroad siding eight or nine miles out of town, or was it Lone Star? I know it wasn't Malaga, for I had other relatives there. Hovagim was a man who seemed to have been made of bone and stone, and yet no one laughed with so much joy and compassion; softly sometimes, almost silently, and other times loudly and with all of his body, so that he fell or flung himself to the ground, rolled over, leaped up, and nearly died. Perhaps it was laughter that killed him at thirty-seven. I don't know. I've never been able to decide what it is that ends mortal life. He lived alone on the vineyard in a kind of shack-house in which among other things was a phonograph and a dozen records of songs of Armenia, Kurdistan, and Turkey. He had a cow. He had a revolver and a shotgun. He had a horse and a buggy. Two



or three times he brought the horse and the buggy to the little house on San Benito Avenue, picked up my brother Henry and myself, and took us to the Goshen vineyard. At sundown he got out his shotgun and we went along with him to the Muscat vines to see what we would see. We saw jackrabbits which were pests, which ate the young shoots of new vines. Hovagim shot them and they leaped and died. We saw quail, doves, and kildees, but better than seeing kildees was hearing them as they plunged straightaway, wailing clean and clear at the enormity of being part of life, a cry both joyous and despairing, which I shall never forget and which shall always be associated in my thinking and memory with the human race and one of its first exponents, Hovagim. After dark we walked back to the house, and there he cooked supper and we sat down in the light of the kerosene lamp and ate and talked—in a mixture of bad Armenian and bad English. After he put a record on the phonograph and we listened to the old music. He put his water-pipe in order, sat on the floor, and smoked, and listened to the old music. It was said of him that he had a wife in Bitlis, and two sons; but the wife had died, the sons had gone along to her father's house. Hovagim was alone in California. No one was so fiercely devoted to kindness and truth as this lonely man. In the last years of his short life he took another wife; but one knew he'd lost his life when he'd lost his wife and his sons. Suddenly I was at his funeral and that was the end of Hovagim, except that here I am thirty-five years later writing about him.

Hovagim was the human race: sorrowful, lonely, laughing.

There were others, many others: relatives, friends, strangers.

Huff sold popcorn from a wagon on the Republican Corner when I sold papers there every night after school. He was a skinny old man with a large patch of black cloth over his left eye and cheek. At first glance people were frightened by his appearance; perhaps at second, too. I do not remember anybody stopping to chat with him. He seemed grim, if not sinister. Actually he was a lonely old man who lived in a furnished room, whose only possession in the world appeared to be his popcorn wagon, whose only place in the world was The Republican Corner. From his room he pushed his wagon to his corner every morning around ten, and back again every night around ten. Huff and I became friends when he was perhaps in his late seventies and I was nine or ten. I had been selling papers on that corner about a month before we began to speak to one another. One rainy night he called me over to the wagon and handed me a bag of popcorn. I thanked him and ate the popcorn. It was very good. After that, we began to be pals. Every night when things were quiet, almost nobody in the streets, we stood and talked. Huff, I discovered, was an atheist, but like so many small-town atheists he kept his ideas to himself and he was very deeply a good man, perhaps a religious one. I remember that when he remarked

that the human race was vicious I could not feel that he was speaking with hatred: I felt rather that he spoke with regret, compassion, and perhaps even love. He named writers whose books he had read with his one eye, which was itself inflamed, watery, and appeared to be on the verge of falling out of his head. As time went on I became entirely oblivious of his physical appearance because I sensed his inner handsomeness. He was proud and independent. One night I offered to push the wagon home for him, for I lived in the same direction, but he would have none of it. And then, weeks later, perhaps months later, one night he asked if I would get the wagon home for him. Doing so was fun, but I knew he must be very ill. The following day when I reached the corner with my papers Huff wasn't there. I went to the house on Mono Street where he lived and the landlady said he was sick in bed. I visited him in his room. As we talked I knew how ill and tired he was and yet how eager he was not to give over and die. He wanted to stay in the world. He wanted to get back to The Republic Corner with his popcorn wagon, so he could go on beholding the human race and being a member of it. He asked if I would come by the following day during my lunch hour. I said I would. He was up, sitting on a chair, waiting, very tired. He asked if I would push the wagon to the corner for him. I did, and left him there and went back to school. After school I found him there, smiling faintly, because he was so ill. This procedure continued for a month. In the meantime from the public library I got the books he had read and began to read around in them: Ingersoll, Paine, Emerson. I read swiftly and carelessly but I think I got what was important for me to get: that the human race is anything any of us wishes to notice and believe it is, and that it can be anything we hope. Huff and I talked about these things. Since it is true, I must remark that now and then I found myself suddenly disliking him very much — his terrible deterioration, his bad luck, his misery and loneliness, his insistence on staying alive at his corner of the world, his very appearance and smell — but soon enough this dislike would pass and I would know that whoever he was, whoever he had been, he was a good man, a helpless one, an earnest one, my neighbor, my friend, my contemporary. Every day at noon and every night at ten for a month or so I got his wagon back and forth. I knew he was dying. I even asked if he wanted to go to the County Hospital out by the Fairgrounds and get in bed and rest the rest of his life. He did not. He wanted to follow the schedule we were following. One day at noon the landlady told me he had died during the night, and so I never saw him again. I didn't go to his funeral. I don't even know if he had one. The theory about old men around town like Huff was that they were misers, that they had great wealth hidden away



Mihran Saroyan (uncle), Armenak Saroyan (father), William, Takoohi Saroyan (mother), circa 1909 (Courtesy <https://www.foreversaroyan.com/photos>)

somewhere. I never believed any of this about Huff. I knew he had a popcorn wagon for some time. I never saw the wagon again, either.

Huff was the human race, too.

A boy my age who came to Emerson School barefooted in the winter was another. His family came to town in a wagon that stopped alongside the Santa Fe Railroad

continued on next page



COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page

tracks near Foley's Packerhouse. There were four or five children, the father and mother. They lived in and around the wagon. The boy came to school about two weeks, and then the family picked up and went somewhere else. He was a patient fellow who probably suffered more than anybody ever guessed, especially when he could not tell Miss Chambers his address, and when so many of the other boys looked at him as if he were a freak simply because he had no shoes. I thought a great deal about trying to become this boy's friend but it was not to be. He wanted no friend and it was understandable that he didn't. I wanted to tell him that he could sell papers and make money--help his family and himself--but it is sometimes the very deepest kind of rudeness to try to be of help to some people.

There were others.

But there were places, too, and the places that meant the most to me I have already mentioned: the public library and the Fairgrounds. I needed both. I needed to read, and I needed to use the spectacle of man in action, showing himself off, his livestock, his produce, his machinery, his art, even: the wretched paintings and sculptures his confusion and boredom had driven him to making.

Two other places were very important to me in Fresno: the theatre and the church. The names of the theatres were: Liberty, Kinema, Bijou, Strand, Hippodrome, Orpheum. The church was the First Armenian Presbyterian. At the theatres I saw the human race in moving pictures and on the stage in vaudeville. He was forever in search of something: escape from boredom and failure, passage to grace and meaning. Only at the church did he seem to come near grace and meaning, especially when he opened the hymn book and his mouth in earnest song. I sang, too. I still do. The Protestant songs are thus a part of my own search for meaning.

There is no end to a town, any town, if it's where you were born in the first place, and where you were born again, as it is written all men must be. But oh the weather there, the heavenly weather there in the spring, the summer, the autumn, the fall, the winter--the hot sun and the heavy rain, the new green of spring and the fire-golden of fall: the farmers' weather of Fresno, in which I lived and became a part of the human race.

Fresno's native son and perhaps most famous Armenian, born into most humble circumstances, William Saroyan (August 31, 1908 – May 18, 1981) was one of the most prolific writers of the 1930s and 1940s, writing extensively about the Armenian immigrant life and actually using the Fresno community as the setting and characters for many of his works. Saroyan was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1940, the New York Drama Critics' Circle award and, in 1943, he won the Academy Award for Best Story for the film adaptation of his novel *The Human Comedy*. Author Kurt Vonnegut has said that Saroyan was "the first and still the greatest of all the American minimalists."

MY FAVORITE TOWN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA was originally published in the November 1996 issue of *AGBU Magazine*.

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-- Contributed by Christine Vartanian Datian, a native of Fresno and a graduate of California State University, Fresno. Her late grandparents, Simon and Hegina Vartanian emigrated from Bitlis, Turkey to Fresno in 1907 with members of their family. Christine's father, Arthur Vartanian (born in Fresno in 1915), the youngest of five children, and her grandfather Simon (a master tailor) owned and operated Simon & Son Cleaners in downtown Fresno for over 50 years. Her father often talked about growing up in Fresno in the 1920s and 1930s (during the Great Depression), and about various old Armenian families of the time, including William Saroyan and his family. During Saroyan's various trips back to Fresno in those days, he would often "drop by" to visit with old friends, including with Simon, to enjoy a cup of coffee, talk about Bitlis, their ancestral homeland, and discuss the news (and gossip) of the day. Saroyan made his second visit to his ancestral homeland of Armenia in May, 1964. "On the outskirts of the city, Saroyan was greeted with bouquets of freshly picked wildflowers from the mountains of Bitlis. Once in the city, he said he needed no guide because he knew it all by heart from the many times the city was described in his childhood. He shouted: 'Bitlis, Bitlis, Bitlis.' as they walked to the district of Tsapergor, he rejoiced in saying, 'I know all of this. I know the old trees. I am a Bitlisti! My father walked on these roads.' He met the mayor; he smoked a cigarette made from Bitlis tobacco. An old man guided him to the vestiges of a stone house he insisted belonged to Saroyan's own family. He was photographed before the ruined hearth. 'It's a good place to live forever, the people are good, the flowers good. It's an unforgettable day.'" -- Professor Dickran Kouymjian in the Introduction to *An Armenian Trilogy* (1986). Professor Kouymjian is the California State University, Fresno, Armenian Studies Program, Emeritus. Christine is a regular contributor to the Recipes Section of the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* newspaper.

"Bitlis has a complex history, having been occupied by Muslim Arabs, Armenians, Byzantines, Persians, Mongols, Kurds, Ottomans, Russians, and finally modern Turks. Both sides of Saroyan's family were from Bitlis. In fact, Armenak and Takoohi had the same last name, though they weren't related by blood. The Saroyan roots ran deep there and in the whole region around Lake Van. For much of Saroyan's life, Bitlis was legend, available only in stories from his elders. The reality of Bitlis was immaterial compared to the symbol it represented: the culture of his people and the tribe he could belong to with unconditional love." -- *The Place of Places*: Chapter 61, Bitlis, Fresno, Los Angeles, 1926 at: <https://www.foreversaroyan.com/the-place-of-places-chapter-61-bitlis-fresno-los-angeles-1926>

Middlesex Sheriff's Office Releases New Video PSA on Arrest Scams

BILLERICA, Mass. — The Middlesex Sheriff's Office (MSO) is continuing to raise awareness about ongoing arrest scams with the release of a new Public Service Announcement (PSA). The video highlights red flags to be aware of and reminds the public of ways to protect themselves and their loved ones.

The MSO continues to field calls almost daily from residents targeted over the phone by scammers claiming to be members of the MSO and other law enforcement agencies. These scammers often demand payment using gift cards, cryptocurrency, or wire transfers for things like failing to appear for jury duty or pay taxes.

The PSA emphasizes that legitimate law enforcement professionals will:

- Never contact you over the phone to pay non-existent fines or fees for things like missing jury duty.
- Never request you pay fines or fees using unconventional methods of payment, like gift cards.
- Never ask for your bank account information or social security information.

"Scammers continue to prey on our communities by posing as trusted members of law enforcement," said Middlesex Sheriff Peter J. Koutoujian. "While we and our colleagues have sought to get the word out about these scams in recent years, we hope this new video PSA will serve as an additional reminder that legitimate law enforcement will never act in this manner."

The MSO encourages the community to watch the PSA on its website – www.middlesexsheriff.org – and social media channels and share it with their loved ones. If you believe you have been targeted by a scam, please contact your local police or sheriff's office immediately.

As part of the MSO's Law Enforcement and Residents Networking (LEARN) initiative, the MSO is proud to provide presentations to the community that cover the common and emerging scams targeting residents; tips to avoid falling victim to scammers; and red flags to look out for.

Organizations interested hosting a presentation can contact the MSO's Director of Community Affairs Ken Doucette at KDoucette@sdm.state.ma.us for more information.



TEKEYAN CULTURAL ASSOCIATION PASADENA GLENDALE CHAPTER

Join Us for an Inspiring Evening

Elegance in Harmony

Painting Exhibition

December 13, 14, 15

By

The Internationally Renowned Artist

HRAIR

The artist will be painting live creating a masterpiece for all present to enjoy and witness his unique talent.

Friday, December 13 at 7:00 pm at the TCA Beshgeturian Center, 1901 N Allen Avenue, Altadena

Champagne cocktail reception

Invitation

The exhibition will be open on December 14 & 15 from 4 – 8 pm





COMMUNITY NEWS



South America Trip: Buenos Aires. 11.2024: Gathering of AGBU Buenos Aires committees at AGBU Center, Buenos Aires

AGBU President Simonian Visits South American Armenian Communities to Strengthen Ties

AGBU, from page 7

The trip fortuitously coincided with the 50th anniversary of AGBU's Instituto Marie Manoogian (IMM), giving the delegation an opportunity to take part in the school's celebrations. The team was gratified to meet with Buenos Aires City Mayor Jorge Macri, who spoke at the celebration. In his congratulatory remarks, Macri said, "You Armenians often thank Argentina for welcoming your ancestors, for integrating them, for embracing your people. But I want to thank the Armenians for making Argentina what it is today."

While in Argentina, the agenda was punctuated with high level meetings with the Buenos Aires Chapter committee members and those from IMM to discuss curriculum and new developments in education.

Sarkissian, an education specialist and Central Board advisor to the AGBU education department, met with IMM high school Principal Marco Martin and Ana Salgado, the director of the kindergarten and primary school, and Rector Juan Balian, as well as members of the teaching faculty and the school board's educational committee.

Sarkissian later reported that the discussions were very productive. "Three priorities were identified by the school, which we are pleased to know are being actively pursued. First, IMM is looking to increase English language fluency among students. They also recognize the need to maximize the integration of innovation and technology into the school curricula. With regard to enrollment, they would like to increase the student population by as many as 100 students," Sarkissian noted, adding that she imparted to the IMM leaders that the Central Board is seeking to ensure that each AGBU educational institution reaches a standard that assures financial sustainability and student success as well as reinforces community engagement and contribution.

At the same time, Simonian sat in on the IMM English, Armenian and computer programming classes in session, engaging directly with the students. On the cultural front, he and his team attended an exhibition of artwork created by IMM alumni, on display on the school's premises.

Throughout the Buenos Aires visit, Simonian and his team interacted with Arme-



South America Trip: Cordoba. 4 11. 2024: Simonian delegation and AGBU Uruguay representatives with Armenian Ambassador to Uruguay at Embassy, Montevideo

nian youth from scouts and sports groups (where he joined a soccer game in progress) to students and young professionals.

They met with the Liga de Jóvenes, YP Buenos Aires and Antranik Scouts at the AGBU Buenos Aires Center, followed by a meeting with the AGBU Buenos Aires Executive Board and Committees, led by Chair Antonio Sarafian. That evening, they were treated to a traditional Armenian dinner at the acclaimed Restaurant AGBU in Villa Crespo, a 47-year-old non-profit venture benefiting IMM's annual senior trip to Armenia and a favorite among mainstream patrons and tourists alike.

In addition to attending an AGBU Buenos Aires awards ceremony and meeting with AGBU leaders, educators, and program participants, Simonian engaged with high-profile figures, dignitaries, and public officials in the Armenian and mainstream Argentine spheres. This included Argentine business magnate and philanthropist Eduardo Eurnekian and nephews Martin and Hugo, in addition to representatives from other Armenian organizations such as the Tekeyan Cultural Association, St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Church, and the Armenian Institutions of the Republic of Argentina (IARA). Meetings with diplomatic officials included the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Marc Stanley

continued on next page



South America Trip: Montevideo. 5 11.2024: Simonian delegation, committee members, and Erevan 50 Scouts at AGBU Center, Montevideo



COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page

Armenian Ambassador to Argentina Hovhannes Virabyan, as well as High Commissioner of Diaspora Affairs Zareh Sinanyan, also visiting the country from Armenia.

Representatives and leaders from the AGBU Cordoba chapter, led by Secretary Claudia Torcomian, in addition to its Liga de Jóvenes and recently launched Young Professionals group, traveled the long distance across the country to personally welcome Simonian to Argentina and present their ideas to bolster youth development and connect Armenian youth regionally.

Uruguay Visit

The first order of AGBU business in Montevideo was a tour of the AGBU Uruguay Center and a work session with Uruguay's National Administration of Public Education (ANEP). Simonian, Sarkissian and Akilian discussed the joint projects of AGBU X ANEP with Aldo Rodriguez, the ANEP director of language policies. Rodriguez made a presentation to the delegation about these and other initiatives under consideration. AGBU Montevideo is also exploring ways to reorganize and maximize the impact of the resources available to implement them.

The Armenians of Uruguay have been hailed as highly influential in the country's educational system, most notably through the efforts of AGBU Uruguay. To date, the national government has incorporated the Armenian language into the curriculum country-wide and has developed a series of books to teach Armenian as a foreign language called *Luys yev Armen*.

The next day they met with the AGBU Uruguay committee, chaired by Jose Geozucaraian, followed by a visit to Armenian Ambassador to Uruguay Mariam Gevorgyan at the Armenian Embassy.

Brazil Visit

After meeting with Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Brazil Bishop Narek Berberian at the Armenian Cathedral of St. George and visiting its Armenian school, Simonian and his team enjoyed a welcome lunch with AGBU Brazil board members and Armenia's Youth Chess Team, which was in town to compete in the FIDA Youth Chess Championships. The Chapter hosted a dinner in Simonian's honor with repre-

mittee members about future possibilities.

Throughout the South American tour, Simonian expressed appreciation for the unwavering support of local Armenian communities in the region. He also encouraged continued collaboration and solidarity in meeting broader Armenian initiatives, emphasizing the role of innovation and technology in enhancing Armenian causes globally. He shared insights from AGBU programs focused on STEAM education and digital arts, underscoring how connecting innovative platforms are essential for connecting Armenian youth worldwide, thereby fostering a shared cultural identity.

Upon his return to the United States, Simonian praised the hard work and effort by the local hosts for making his mission to the region so rewarding and inspiring. "This first visit to the Latin-American Armenian community reflected well on AGBU's longstanding commitment to empower local Armenian communities worldwide. The enthusiasm, vibrancy, thoughtfulness, and talent demonstrated throughout our tour stands out as a model of what can be accomplished when good ideas are driven by open minds and shared visions of the



Photo 6: South America Trip: São Paulo. 6 11.2024: Delegation and AGBU Brazil representatives with Diocesan Primate Bishop Narek Berberian at Armenian Cathedral of St. George, São Paulo

future. I cannot thank everyone enough for the warmth, hospitality, and goodwill that they extended to us. It's an experience we will cherish, and we look forward to further engagement, collaboration, and productive in-person exchanges like these."



To Our Readers:

The *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* is the first English-language Armenian weekly published in the US from 1932. Readers can learn of the most important developments in Armenia, as well as international politics, art and culture throughout the world in a convenient and concise format.

The *Mirror-Spectator* has covered the violence and political uncertainty affecting Armenia and Artsakh, supported efforts at humanitarian fundraising, and continued to provide periodic video reports online. Send us your email if you wish to receive our weekly updates.

We continue with our annual tradition of publishing your Christmas and New Year's wishes, and greetings to relatives and friends in the final issue of the year. In case you wish to give gift subscriptions of the *Mirror-Spectator* for Christmas, for your convenience, we are placing a gift subscription form in the newspaper as well as one below. Your support is what keeps us going and we always enjoy hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Signature of Alin K. Gregorian]

Alin K. Gregorian
Editor

[Signature of Aram Arkun]

Aram Arkun
Managing Editor



South America Trip: Buenos Aires. 3 11. 2024: Sam Simonian with representatives of AGBU Cordoba, Buenos Aires

representatives of all of Brazil's AGBU committees and other Armenian organizations in attendance as well as the Ambassador of Armenia to Brazil Armen Yeghanyan and Brazil's Secretary of Science, Technology, and Innovation of the State of São Paulo Vahan Agopyan. On the last day, the delegation visited the AGBU facilities for a working meeting with AGBU São Paulo Chair Avedis Markossian and AGBU com-

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COMMUNITY NEWS

COAF 21st Annual Holiday Gala Gathers All-Star Lineup To Drive Transformative Change in Rural Armenia

NEW YORK — The Children of Armenia Fund (COAF) will host its largest fundraiser of the year with its 21st Annual Holiday Gala on Saturday, December 14, at Cipriani 25 Broadway. The evening will celebrate over two decades of COAF's transformative work in the villages of rural Armenia.

The event will feature a distinguished lineup, including acclaimed actor and COAF Board Member Joe Manganiello, Emmy and Tony Award-winning actress Andrea Martin, and a headline performance by two-time Grammy-winning singer Gloria Gaynor.

Armenian stars Vache Tovmasyan and Karren Karagulian, will join to be honored with the Cultural Advocacy Award. The two actors are being celebrated for their roles in *Anora*, this year's Palme d'Or winner at Cannes and a frontrunner for the Oscar for Best Picture. COAF board members Shaké and Vahe Nahapetian will also be honored with the 2024 Save A Generation Award for their years of unwavering support and dedication to COAF's mission.

Since its founding in 2003, COAF has impacted over 100,000 people across 80+ communities in Armenia, advancing education, healthcare, social services, and economic development. Highlights from the past year include:

- New School in Debed Village: Construction of a primary school aimed at improving the overall well-being for students and teachers.
- Healthcare Pilot Program: COAF launched a new health clinic in Lori, col-



Top row, from left, Joe Manganiello, Andrea Martin and Karren Karagulian; bottom row, from left, Gloria Gaynor, Shaké and Vahe Nahapetian and Vache Tovmasyan

laborating with the Armenian Ministry of Health to pilot national reforms in primary care.

- Youredjian Child and Family Care Center: This newly established center in Armavir offers early childhood education, speech therapy, psychological support, and access to social workers.

- Award-Winning English Textbooks: COAF published English textbooks recognized for excellence by the Armenian gov-

ernment, now distributed in schools across the country.

- Groundbreaking for New SMART Center: This Armavir learning hub will follow in the steps of our SMART Center in Lori, increasing access to a creative and inspiring curriculum.

This year's proceeds will support COAF's ongoing programs and ambitious new initiatives, including the expansion of its SMART Centers. COAF currently

operates a modern learning center in Lori that serves 1,600 children each week, with three additional centers in development, including a new campus in Armavir already under construction.

Readers can support this vital work by contributing at coaf.org/donations. For inquiries about sponsorships and gifts, contact Haig Boyadjian at haig.boyadjian@coaf.org.

2025-26 UCLA Promise Armenian Institute Offers Grant and Fellowship Opportunities

LOS ANGELES — The Promise Armenian Institute (PAI) at UCLA, announced recently Grant and Fellowship Opportunities for the 2025-2026 academic year. These opportunities are available to promote scholarship in areas relevant to the PAI mission.

The UCLA PAI offers Faculty Research Grants, Course Development Grants, Faculty/Scholar Travel Grants, Student Research or Travel Grants, Post-Candidacy Ph.D. Fellowships, and Postdoctoral Fel-

lowships for research in fields represented within Armenian studies, such as Armenian language, literature, and history, as well as all other academic fields — including but not limited to the social sciences, health sciences, humanities, music, arts, engineering, and public policy — with a clear research emphasis on or direct relevance to Armenia or Armenians.

These one-year grants and PhD fellowships are available to UCLA personnel at the appropriate level, while postdoctor-

al fellowships for up to two years in duration are available from the PAI or from its Armenian Genocide Research Program for doctoral degree recipients with degrees from any institution.

The PAI strongly encourages collaborative research projects between UCLA faculty and scholars/institutions in the Republic of Armenia.

Scholars with doctoral degrees from institutions in Armenia or other non-U.S. institutions are strongly encouraged to apply for a PAI Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Additional funding opportunities are available through the UCLA PAI-affiliated Operation Armenia (OA) program for public health or healthcare-related research pertaining to Armenia and/or Armenians globally, with emphasis on proposals that are in alignment with the Republic of Ar-

menia's stated healthcare and public health priorities, such as implementation of universal health coverage, emergency preparedness, and primary care strengthening.

To learn more about these funding opportunities and access the appropriate electronic applications, visit the Funding Opportunities page at the UCLA Promise Armenian Institute website.

For the coming academic year, fellowship and research grant applications will be accepted during the period December 1, 2024 through February 1, 2025, unless otherwise specified, while PAI travel grant applications will be accepted through April 1, 2025.

Interested applicants are invited to visit the Current and Past PAI Grant/Fellowship Recipients page to learn more about recently funded projects and fellows.

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Arts & Culture

Artists Bring International Repertoire, Humor to Frankfurt Performance

By Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

FRANKFURT — “Opera plus” was the title of the concert held on November 30 at the International Theater of Frankfurt, a venue known for its artistic excellence and cultural diversity. Although its origins stretch back to 1987, the ITF in its current form as a guest performance stage represents a collaborative effort established in 1998 between the Cultural Department of Frankfurt and the sponsoring association (Förderverein) of the theater. Committed to presenting a variety of artistic forms of expression characteristic of cultures from all over the world, the theater hosts professional performances by renowned artists. For Frankfurt residents of different backgrounds, the



Karine Babajanyan

theater serves as a “cultural homeland;” this was certainly the case for the large Armenian contingent at the evening’s concert, representing the community in Frankfurt. For all citizens in the city and region, the theater is a gateway to new cultural landscapes, experienced in a spirit of tolerance and dialogue.

With “Opera plus,” the ITF offered an evening of opera classics plus songs and piano works from several language cultures, presented by two prominent Armenian artists. Soprano Karine Babajanyan, who was celebrating her 25th anniversary on the opera scene, sang (appropriately) arias from some of her most famous roles: from Elisabeth in Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* to Lauretta in Giacomo Puccini’s *Gianni Schicchi* to the title roles in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* and Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*.

As for the “plus,” the two artists also performed Armenian works, Melikian’s *Vart* (The rose) and *Ah, wie schön ist es auf den Bergen* (Ah, how beautiful it is on the mountains) from a text by Hovhannes Tumanyan, an Armenian folk song *Loosin Yelav* (The moon has risen) see FRANKFURT, page 15



Director Sareen Hairabedian with the founder and CEO of the Armenian Film Society, Armen Karaoghlanian (photo by Karine Armen)

A Young Boy’s Karabakh Journey in ‘My Sweet Land’

By Karine Armen

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

GLENDAL — “My Sweet Land,” a documentary by Sareen Hairabedian, was screened at Laemmle Theatre in Glendale from November 29 to December 5, with three different question-and-answer sessions scheduled. Friday night’s moderator was Abby Sun, the director of Artists Programs and editor of *Documentary Magazine* IDA. On Saturday, Armen Karaoghlanian, the founder and CEO of the Armenian Film Society (AFS), moderated the session, while Matt Carey, the documentary editor of *Deadline*, did it on Tuesday, December 3.

The documentary follows 11-year-old Vrej for four years, from 2019 to 2022. Vrej dreams of becoming a dentist in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh). But the young boy has to deal with the 40-day War of 2020. His family is forced to flee. Later, they return to their village to find it has been razed.

The first time that Hairabedian traveled to Artsakh with her collaborator, Azza Hourani, was in 2018. They interviewed many families. Vrej’s family lived in Tsaghkashen in the Martakert region, a few kilometers from the Azerbaijani border. Vrej’s younger sister and brother have captivating parts in the film. Most of the camera angles are from children’s points of view. Hairabedian considered it essential to create a film from a children’s perspective. She returned to Artsakh several times.

“I chose Vrej because he was comfortable in front of the camera. He was curious and shared his thoughts,” she said on Friday night. She added, “Vrej’s grandmother gave me permission to join the family and capture their daily lives after developing a relationship and trust.”

During Saturday’s Q&A with Karaoghlanian, Hairabedian explained, “I was the only one with a camera. I didn’t want to take a big crew with me.” She followed them closely and did the cinematography to maintain intimacy. Hairabedian said, “The rules of going to Artsakh changed over the years. I faced many challenges to complete my project.”



Director and producer of the film Sareen Hairabedian (photo by Karine Armen)

In a No-Nonsense Memoir, Cher Traces the Path to Stardom, With and Without Sonny

By Alexandra Jacobs

Before Twitter morphed into the strange ghost town of X, with lurking users wondering whether to post or stomping off in high dudgeon for Bluesky and Threads, Cher was one of its finest sheriffs. Publications including the *New York Times* analyzed her grammar-defying style and compiled her stinging critiques of the then and future president Donald J. Trump.

In Volume 1 of her confident, confiding new autobiography, which covers the period from her birth on May 20, 1946 (“under the sign of Taurus on the cusp of Gemini, so it’s like there are three of us in here”), to the dawn of her serious movie career in the early ’80s, Cher explains that her distinctive syntax on the platform evolved from undiagnosed dyslexia. “Punctuation marks are like symbols to me that you throw in the air and they land where they land,” she writes.

Happily *Cher: The Memoir* is not the round of verbal 52 pickup this portends, but a detailed and characteristically profane recollection of its author’s eventful life: singing, dancing and acting her way out of a childhood so “Dickensian” there were rubber bands around the saddle-shoe soles and ants in the Rice Krispies.

Cher’s embodiment of that trendy wellness buzzword “resilience” started from the moment her mother, Jackie Jean Crouch (later Georgia Holt), bailed on an abortion appointment. “It was her body, her life and her choice to make,” Cher writes. “Thank God she got off that table, though, or I wouldn’t be here to write these pages.” Her famous contralto has been modulated, but not Auto-tuned past recognition.

Cherilyn, as she was called, though her birth certificate read Cheryl, is America’s melting pot personified, and her long place on the front (and sometimes back) burner of pop culture evokes both the country’s loftiest promises and its worst failures. A great-grandmother on her mother’s side had Cherokee heritage, raising her children in a log cabin in the Missouri backwoods, in poverty that dripped down generations. Cher’s biological father, who was Armenian, stole, gambled and would become a heroin addict.

During the Depression, Jackie was forced from the age of 5 to sing on bar counters for nickels. Rather than confront his many problems, her own father once tried to gas her and her brother in their beds. Understandably, Jackie was on the move for most of the rest of her 96 years: working as a cigarette girl at the Copacabana nightclub; losing a role in “The Asphalt Jungle” to Marilyn Monroe right before she found out she was pregnant with Cher’s half-sister, Georganne; and getting hit on by Desi Arnaz



ARTS & CULTURE

Recipe Corner



by Christine
Vartanian Datian



Lebanese & Syrian Meat and Bulgur Balls in Yoghurt | Kibbeh Labaniyya

Author Ghillie Başan writes: “The food of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan takes me on a journey as every dish has a connection to stories and passion, old traditions and new. Visiting this region is never dull as life unfolds before your eyes with chaos in the noisy streets, colour in the busy markets, and a feast of flavor wherever you go. If there is one thing that can unite communities it is food: the garlicky hummus and tangy smoked aubergine dip; spicy falafel and juicy fattoush; hot buttery pastries that melt in the mouth; comforting rice dishes and bean stews; classic kibbeh in all shapes and sizes; and moreish milk puddings and fritters in scented syrup. There are Muslim feasts and Christian celebrations, Jewish and Armenian traditions, Palestinian communities and Arab heritage — there’s a little bit of everything under this vast culinary roof.”

In her book *The Food and Cooking of Lebanon, Jordan and Syria*, Başan writes about “Armenian Jewelled Bulgur, White Bean Puree with Feta and Olives, Grilled Fish with Dates, and Braised Rabbit with Aubergines.”

Brought up in Kenya, where her parents were doctors, Başan was sent to boarding school in Scotland, from where she entered the University of Edinburgh to study languages. Once at the university, she changed her course from languages to social anthropology. Başan met her husband in Turkey, and they moved to live in the United States for two years before returning to Scotland. Their first book, *Classic Turkish Cookery*, was nominated for two awards and gained them a weekly slot on the *Sunday Herald* and a contract for their second book, *The Middle Eastern Kitchen*. The couple are no longer together, and she is raising her two children, Yazzie and Zeki alone.

Başan is a Cordon Bleu trained chef and has written over 40 books. She lives in a very wild spot in the Cairngorms National Park, Scottish Highlands. Her articles have appeared in the *Sunday Herald*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *BBC Good Food* magazine, *TasteTurkey* and *Today’s Diet and Nutrition*. This is a popular kibbeh dish, only this time they are cooked in yogurt — kibbeh labaniyya are real comfort food in Syria and Lebanon. Kibbeh are traditionally pounded by hand but it’s easier to use a food processor if you have one. This recipe is from Başan’s *The Lebanese Cookbook*, and is a simple, comforting and delicious dish, popular in Lebanon and Syria.

Serves 6



Ghillie Başan, internationally acclaimed writer, food anthropologist, and cookery workshop host

FOR THE KIBBEH:

8 oz. fine bulgur, well-rinsed and squeezed dry
1 onion, cut into quarters
8 oz. lean lamb, diced
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground allspice
1 teaspoon ground paprika
Sea salt and ground black pepper

FOR THE SAUCE:

1 1/2 pints Greek-style yogurt
1/2 tablespoon corn flour, mixed to a paste with a little water
1 tablespoon butter or ghee*
1-2 cloves garlic, crushed
A small handful of dried mint leaves, crushed

PREPARATION:

Place the bulgur in a large bowl. Put the onion into the food processor, whizz to a purée, and add it to the bulgur. Process the lamb in batches in the food processor and add the puréed meat to the bulgur. Add the spices and the seasoning to the meat and bulgur mixture and mix well. Blend the mixture in batches, combining it with spoonful’s of cold water to ease the process, or pound it with your fist until smooth.

Knead the blended kibbeh mixture once more in the bowl, if using a processor, then cover and put aside.

Beat the yogurt until it is smooth and pour it into a heavy pan. Beat in the corn flour paste with a little salt and gently heat the yogurt, stirring all the time, until it is almost at scalding point — don’t let it boil as it will curdle. Reduce the heat and simmer for about 5 minutes, until it is thick.

Take portions of the kibbeh mixture in your fingers and mold them into ovals. Gently place them in the yogurt sauce, cover, and simmer gently for about 20 minutes, until the kibbeh are cooked. Melt the butter in a pan and stir in the crushed garlic and mint until the garlic begins to brown. Spoon the kibbeh onto a serving dish with the yogurt sauce then drizzle the flavored butter over the top. Serve immediately.

For this recipe: <https://www.kaveyeats.com/lebanese-syrian-meat-and-bulgur-balls-in-yoghurt-kibbeh-labaniyya>

* Ghee is a form of highly-clarified butter that is traditionally used in Asian cooking. Like butter, ghee is typically made from cow’s milk.

The Lebanese Cookbook: Exploring the Food of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan Hardcover — Illustrated, December 7, 2020 by Ghillie Başan (Author)

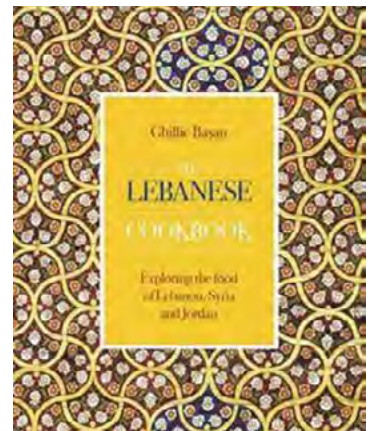
To order, go to: <https://www.amazon.com/Lebanese-Cookbook-Exploring-Lebanon-Jordan/dp/0754834697>

The Levant is a region long known for the largesse of its hospitality. In *The Lebanese Cookbook*, Ghillie Başan explores the foods and traditions of a swathe of the Fertile Crescent that takes in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. Başan spent many years living and working in the Middle East (as well as Europe, North America, India, South East Asia and Africa), and has published a great number of food books covering the individual cuisines of Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Morocco, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. “One of the finest writers on Middle Eastern food is Ghillie Başan,” says Clarissa Dickson Wright.

The cuisine of the region has been driven in large part by the excellent locally-grown ingredients — the area is not known as the Fertile Crescent without good reason — farmers produce a variety of grains and pulses, high quality dairy, and above all a cornucopia of fresh fruit and vegetables. Landscapes run from hot, dry coastlines and lush, fertile flood-plain valleys to sandy deserts and cooler high mountains, giving a variety of different growing climates. Sheep are particularly well suited to mountainous terrain, making lamb and mutton the most commonly used meat, with beef also readily available.

Başan’s first chapter introduces in turn Lebanon, Syria and Jordan before sharing the ancient history of the wider region, and how this history influenced culture and cuisine. For example, Phoenician traders introduced herbs, spices, fruits, nut and dried fish; Persian merchants brought ingredients such as pomegranates, saffron, aubergines and lemons, together with a range of culinary techniques; the Romans extended trade routes even further, and advanced the use of spices and herbs in food and medicine. The Golden Age of Islam brought with it a cultural emphasis on etiquette and tableware, with guidelines written about manners, diet and health. The Ottoman Empire delivered Turkish influences, and also saw the introduction of new world ingredients such as chilli peppers, tomatoes and corn. Coffee too was discovered, introduced and flourished during this era. More recent history is responsible for the current country borders, and has sadly been a period of terrible conflict. Throughout these difficult years, a regional love for good food and hospitality has persisted.

Learning about different religious festivals provides more insight into food traditions, with Christian, Islamic and Jewish celebrations observed throughout the year. Along with these are the many personal milestones in life (such as birthdays and weddings) which are often celebrated with specific foods and rituals. The passage about the religious food rules of Islam is also concise and useful. We learn too about the joy of shopping for food in the souks (markets), and the tradition of mezze — a concept that has existed across the different ages of the region, but today is named after the Persian ‘maza,’ meaning to taste or relish.



ARTS & CULTURE

Artists Bring International Repertoire to Frankfurt

FRANKFURT, from page 13

by Luciano Berio, Italian pieces by G.B. Pergolesi and Gaetano Donizetti, and, concluded with two favorites by George Gershwin, *The Man I Love* and *I Got Rhythm*.

The duo's performance was not only musically excellent, but by injecting dramatic and comic elements, they also transmitted the spirit of the operatic stage. Pianist Khachatryan accompanied the highly accomplished soprano in a lively and moving dialogue, and displayed her extraordinary technical skill and musical interpretation in two challenging solo works, Aram Khachaturian's *Toccata* and S. Talian's *In A-Mur*.

Both artists have extensive international experience. Babajanyan, who graduated with honors from the Komitas Conservatory in Yerevan and started her career at the Yerevan National Theatre, sang in several German cities before becoming a soloist at the Stuttgart Staatsoper from 2003 to 2011.



Lusine Khachatryan and Karine Babajanyan

She has performed in operas in Tokyo, Beijing, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Dresden, Zurich, Tel Aviv, Geneva, Copenhagen, Mexico City, Antwerp, Warsaw, Bern, Budapest, Leipzig, Paris, Vienna, Seoul, Milan and Cagliari among others.

Khachatryan, herself a prizewinning soloist, has appeared in Frankfurt, Munich, Stuttgart, Amsterdam, Paris, London, Brussels, Barcelona, Tokyo, New York, and others. In addition to her solo recitals, she performs with Chamber and Symphony orchestras, and with her brother, violinist Sergey Khachatryan. As a pianist she developed an intriguing new art form in 2012, "Piano Theatre," in which she combines classical music and drama. This may have inspired the theatrical touches to the evening's event. Among the pieces she has composed and performed are *Maria Stuart* based on Friedrich Schiller (2012), *Chopin – The Piano Is My Second Self* (2013), *Clara Wieck plays Schumann* (2013) and *????S ("Nostalgia")* about Armenian culture (2015). (See <https://mirrorspectator.com/2019/11/21/armenian-pianist-celebrates-the-schumanns/>)

In a No-Nonsense Memoir, Cher Traces the Path to Stardom, With and Without Sonny

CHER, from page 13

after appearing as a Paris model in a potato-sack gown on "I Love Lucy."

"Was it seven or eight husbands in the end?" Cher wonders.

As a minor subjected to whiplash-inducing itineracy (Pennsylvania, Texas, California, New York), she watched these husbands come and go while bouncing from school to school. She was variously stashed with neighbors, babysitters, in-laws and mean nuns — some of whom banned patent leather, lest it reflect panties.

In fourth grade, having witnessed her mother in drama class, she staged a performance of "Oklahoma!" Elvis and Eartha Kitt inspired her, but Cher also identified strongly with Dumbo, the Disney elephant. I need to be up there, she decided, meaning the big screen, though big ears to flap away into the sky might have appealed as well.

Going "no-contact" with difficult relatives has become troublesomely au courant. Cher's approach is more full body contact, followed by eye roll. "I mean, jeez. My family. You couldn't make it up" is a typical aside. (You understand why "Snap out of it!" from "Moonstruck" is one of her most-memed lines.)

Men in this memoir must be greeted with a skeptically arched eyebrow. To borrow Cher's Twitter patois for a sec, IT WAS A DIFFERENT TIME, OK?! She was only 15 when Warren Beatty lent her Natalie Wood's bathing suit and took her for cigarettes and a swim. She was 16 when she met the 11-years-older, mid-divorce Salvatore Phillip "Sonny" Bono, who lied to her about being a descendant of Napoleon Bonaparte, and she moved into his apartment in exchange for cooking and cleaning — not sex, at first.

A fan of Machiavelli, he became her first husband and de facto manager. Her second, the Southern rock singer Gregg Allman, like her father, struggled with heroin.

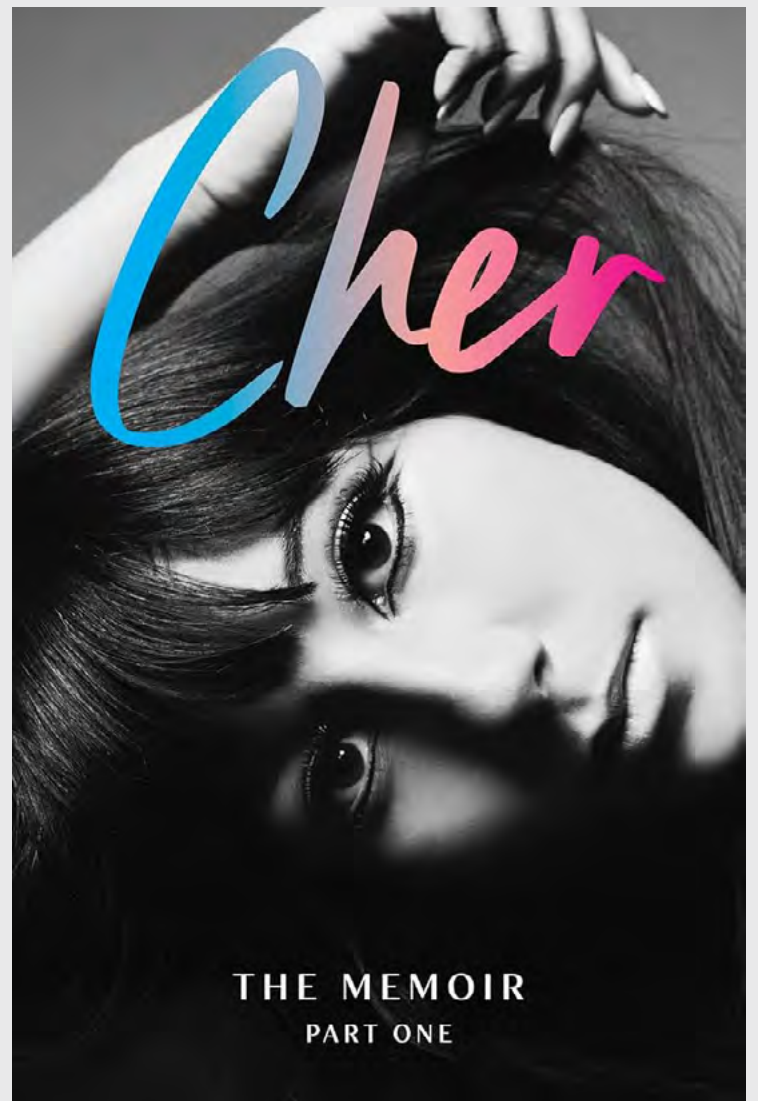
Sonny and Cher found themselves astraddle changing morality codes: Being married afforded them more freedom for innuendo in their act. A song he scrawled on shirt cardboard, "I Got You Babe," took them to (temporary) superstardom, knocking even the Beatles' *Help!* off the top of the U.K. pop charts. (Maybe in Volume 2 Cher will address how it became a punchline in "Groundhog Day.")

The couple had sizzling chemistry in performance, but backstage he was an old-fashioned, controlling Norman Maine type, in cahoots with her therapist and secretly popping Valiums even though he would make public service announcements against marijuana that got him pegged as square. Cher was mostly abstemious.

He worked her like a pack mule and controlled her outside activities to an absurd extent, calling their entourage the "Benevolent Army of El Primo"; she was Prima Donna, he was dubbed His Supremeness, with embroidered jackets to

match. (The '70s may have been "the decade taste forgot," but Cher remembers every detail of her clothes.) Their films "Good Times" and "Chastity," for which their child was named — discussion of his gender transition is deferred — flopped.

Occasionally Cher will turn from the who, where and



when of what happened and linger for a moment on the why. "It's a thousand times harder to come back than to become," she writes. "Becoming famous is hard, but making a comeback is almost impossible."

It remains to be seen how she'll cope with the comeback of her most public antagonist in 4,000-character spurts, if at all, but these 400 pages show the mettle behind the Mackie. Here's to a sequel with sequins, expected in 2025.

CHER: *The Memoir, Part One* | By Cher | Dey Street Books | 432 pp. | \$36

(Alexandra Jacobs is a Times book critic and occasional features writer. This column originally ran on November 19 in the *New York Times*.)

A Young Boy's Karabakh Journey in 'My Sweet Land'

SCREENING, from page 13

Hairabedian graduated from the American University in Washington, DC, with a bachelor's degree in filmmaking and a minor in dance. She was born into an Armenian family in Jordan, where music, dance and films were part of life. Hairabedian's father is a doctor (his mother was Palestinian). Sareen's mother is a theater director and a teacher. Hairabedian was enthusiastic about telling socially conscious stories, and therefore she founded HAI Creative, a media production company through which she collaborates with HBO, United Nations Women, United States Institute of Peace, among others. Sareen's directorial debut, "We Are Not Done Yet," is an HBO documentary that has won several awards. "My Sweet Land" starts with footage

from the mass wedding, which took place in Artsakh on October 16, 2008, and involved around 700 couples. Vrej's parents were among the couples. Vrej shows his favorite wedding photo of them. There is a scene where the young Vrej makes a toast with water, expressing his wish for peace and for returning to his village after the 44-Day War. The five-year-old Arman misses his home and doesn't like the temporary housing. The young boys sing along to Armenian songs and play with toy guns protecting their homeland. Upon returning to their home in Tsaghkashen, they see destruction, bullet holes on the walls, and possibilities of mine explosions. Teachers warn students to be careful and to notify authorities if they see any missiles on the ground.

"My Sweet Land" is a testament to poetic, symbolic and visual storytelling. It depicts war without horrific photos of blood and destruction. The transitions are smooth and symbolic. There are scenes of food, *khatchkars* (Armenian cross stones), and a cross hanging from the windshield mirror. There is a happy scene where the children, the mother, and the two grandmothers are playing a game with walnuts. The camera goes close on the carpet and follows the subjects with close-ups. The audience is in the scene. Suddenly, we hear an explosion sound. We learn there is danger and war.

The film is a co-production between Jordan, France, Ireland and the US.

"Every collaborator was hand-picked. I wanted to make sure they go into the proj-

ect with the same heart and soul," said Hairabedian.

Jordan submitted the film for the 97th Academy Awards (the Oscars), but it was withdrawn due to pressures from the Azerbaijani government. Hairabedian and the Armenian Film Society teamed up to qualify the film for the Academy Awards' Documentary Category. They followed the requirements, which was a certain number of days of screening in any movie theatre in the US.

Hairabedian lives in New York with her husband and 11-month-old son. Last summer, the couple baptized their son in Yerevan, and Vrej became his godfather.

"My Sweet Land" meets the requirements to be screened on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) next year.

Lizzy Vartanian: Embroidery as an Act of Love

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN — Embroidery artist, curator and writer Lizzy Vartanian lives between London and Yerevan. She was born in 1993, in London, to an Armenian mother and an English father (Collier). She has a degree in art history and a diploma in law. She has written for the likes of *Artzy*, *Dazed*, the *Guardian*, *Harper's Bazaar Arabia* and *Vogue Arabia* to name a few. Her activity is diverse: from curating shows in the UK, Jordan, Armenia and Yemen, giving talks and writing exhibition texts for galleries. She has given workshops at institutions including Victoria and Albert Museum, Leighton House, the Other Art Fair and Darat Al Funun. Her work has been exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art and featured on Grayson Perry's Art Club. She has led workshops in Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian and Armenian embroidery styles. She also established Gallery Girl, a London-based curatorial platform and website dedicated to modern and contemporary art from across the globe.

Lizzy, the stereotype for embroidery artist we imagine a 19th century woman or a traditional grandmother, not a Western young lady like you. In this day and age, how does such a “slow” art form like embroidery survive?

While people think of embroidery as being very old fashioned, it is a staple in high fashion and couture. So, it is actually also very modern. For many people, like me, embroidery is a skill passed down from one generation to another.



An old photo rendered in embroidery by Lizzy Vartanian

Embroidery is an ancient artform, but many young artists are finding ways to make it contemporary. I think that embroidery is extra special right now by the very fact that it is slow. When everything in life is so fast, it allows us to sit down and relax. For me personally, it really helps me to stay calm in difficult or stressful situations.

Some compare embroidery with poetry or music. What do you think?

I never thought of it that way, but I can see why the comparison is made. I think embroidery is an act of love. It is very physical, your hands can get tired, it takes time. There is a lot of effort involved. If you make a mistake, it can take even longer to correct it. When you make something for someone, it is because you care deeply for them. It is because you love them.

Some artists transform medieval miniatures into embroidered works of art. Your unique usage of family photographs in embroidery is new, isn't it?

I guess it is something new. I'm not

sure if other people have done it before. I grew up in London, far away from most of my Armenian family. I'm also half Armenian — my father is English — so my only close family growing up was my mother. The people in the black-and-white photographs were from Lebanon and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s. I didn't really know them or what their world was like. I kind of stitch a connection between me and them. I imagine what they were like, the colors of their clothes, etc. The photographs are old, and so is the medium of embroidery, but the way I combine the two is modern.

While seeing an embroidery work, I remember Arshile Gorky's "How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life."

My great-grandmother was from Aintab and made *janyags* (needle lace). We still have them, and they are some of the only possessions we have from Aintab. This was not passed down to us, however. My mother does do embroidery, and she is very talented, but she doesn't do "Armenian"



embroidery, although I would argue the fact that she does embroidery and is Armenian makes it Armenian. Each generation of women in my family has done embroidery in their own unique style. Perhaps not the style of embroidery practiced by each generation is the same, but the act of embroidery is.

Armenian embroidery art has various techniques; do you follow a specific one?

No, not really. Most of my work doesn't use the traditional Armenian techniques but is instead inspired by Armenian culture and history.

It is always interesting to learn what is the life of a young European artist in Yerevan looks like...

Yerevan is still very new to me, and it is hard for me to answer this question as I am still finding my feet. I tell people I'm like a baby learning how to walk. Yerevan is very different to London, but I love it. As an Armenian who has always lived away from their culture it is really exciting to be here and to see how it will impact my work. I am also so grateful to have had the opportunity to have exhibited and worked in Yerevan.

I know some Western Armenian and am now taking Eastern Armenian language lessons with Repat Armenia. I am very interested in learning Armenian dancing. And here I miss my mum's cooking very much, as she was always making Lebanese and Western Armenian food. It is my favorite food in the world!



ARTS & CULTURE

CALENDAR

OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 15 — The Getty Center will host a talk about Armenian cultural heritage sites called *Survivor Objects and Captive Sites: Art and Cultural Heritage in Genocide*. This lecture is free with a reservation and will be presented from 4 to 5 p.m. (PST) in person and online at <https://www.youtube.com/c/gettyresearch>. As scholars of genocide have shown, the genocidal process extends beyond the physical extinction of the targeted community to include the erasure, appropriation, or transfer of the community's cultural assets. During the Armenian Genocide and its aftermath, sites associated with Armenian culture, particularly religious sites, were destroyed, repurposed, appropriated, sold or transferred. Some became cultural heritage sites sundered from their connection to any remaining Armenian communities, while certain sacred objects were looted or relocated to museums far from the Armenian homeland. These sites and objects eventually acquire a "second life as heritage" and as works of art. This lecture considers the implications of genocide with the processes of making sites into patrimony and objects into museum pieces. It reflects on extinction and transformation into art and what this portends for art history and museums in the 21st century. 1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 800, Los Angeles. (310) 440-7300 visitorservices@getty.edu

MASSACHUSETTS

DECEMBER 8 — **CANDLELIT LABYRINTH WALK: IN PEACE & HARMONY.** Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston. Sunday at 4:45pm. Meet & Greet. Enjoy Hot Chocolate & Holiday Cookies. RSVP appreciated hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org

DECEMBER 14 — Society of Istanbul Armenians of Boston presents Dinner

Dance With Barteve Garyan. First time in Boston @ Al Wadi Restaurant, 1249 VFW Parkway West Roxbury. Doors open at 7 p.m. RSVP by mailing checks no later than December 1 to PO BOX 331 Belmont, MA 02478. Tickets \$125. RSVP Arto 857 222 2212 or Garo 617 620 9899

DECEMBER 15 — Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church of Greater Boston and Erevan Chorale Society and Orchestra present their Christmas Holiday Concert, Sunday, 7:00 p.m. at Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church of Greater Boston, 145 Brattle Street, Cambridge. The Christmas Concert is dedicated to the 155th anniversary of the birth of Gomidas Vartabed. Composer Konstantin Petrossian, Music Director & Conductor; Tatev Baroyan, soprano; Fr. Ghazar Bedrossian, tenor. For more information contact Konstantin Petrossian at Petroskon@aol.com, or Aida Diloyan, Chorale corresponding secretary at adiloyan@verizon.net.

DECEMBER 19 — Project Save will host "Holiday Lens and Libations" on December 19, from 6 to 9 p.m. The event will mark the launch of the organization's 50th anniversary. Gathering will take place at the organization's headquarters, 600 Pleasant St., Watertown. RSVP at projectsave.org or email archives@projectsave.org.

MARCH 15 — Global Arts Live, in collaboration with The Friends of Armenian Culture Society presents: The Naghash Ensemble - First Boston Appearance! With its eye on the 21st century, the Naghash Ensemble combines the earthy spirituality of Armenian folk song, new classical music, and medieval polyphonic vocal music. 8 PM, Berklee Performance Center - 136 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston. Tickets: \$30, \$38, \$48, \$58 www.globalartslive.org/content/event_page/10301

RHODE ISLAND

DECEMBER 13 — Christmas Concert @ Sanctuary of Sts. Sahag & Mesrob Armenian Church, 70 Jefferson St., Providence, RI, featuring Armenian Chorale of Rhode Island, Junior Choir, Soloists. 7 p.m. Details to follow.

Send Calendar Items to the Mirror-Spectator: To send calendar items to the Mirror-Spectator, email alin@mirrorspectator.com or alin.gregorian@gmail.com. You can also visit our website, www.mirrorspectator.com, and find the "calendar" section under the heading "More." You can also mail them to the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472. All calendar entries must be received by noon on Monday before publication.

Mary Kouyoumdjian: A Composer Comes of Age

COMPOSER, from page 1

Interestingly enough, the idea of a composition or phrase just popping into her head seems like a romantic conceit of some sort on the part of the listener. Instead, Kouyoumdjian undergoes a rigorous process before each project: "I start with an idea or theme, often related to a political or current event. Then I do copious amounts of research. I use a program called LOGIC to help me with the musical process and then only once I have everything time-lined do I sit down to write the music itself."

As to getting the final piece performed, this involves the sometimes-tedious process of applying for grants and workshoping: "After you have one grant, the others come a lot easier."

Kouyoumdjian cites everyone from Kronos Quartet to the Beatles, to Radiohead and Steven Kazuo Takasugi as influences, though she also grew up playing classical piano, and is particularly fond of Béla Bartók.

To my mind, apart from these influences Kouyoumdjian's music possesses a very deep, plangent quality to it and a definite modernist vibe. Her short, perfectly titled piece, *I Haven't the Words*, displayed lovely tempo and perfectly spaced intervals as played by pianist Shahan Arzruni earlier this year, in front of a packed audience at the New York Arts Club.

But Kouyoumdjian's work is also noteworthy for its range. In 2022-23, the Sheen Center in downtown New York City and Beth Morrison Projects staged "Adoration," an opera based on the Atom Egoyan film of the same title, with music by Kouyoumdjian and lyrics by Royce Vavrek.

Said Kouyoumdjian, "I worked on *Adoration* for several years. The genesis of the project came from my collaboration with

Vavrek, who like Atom, is Canadian and who, like myself, is a huge fan of Egoyan."

The film follows Simon, an orphaned high school student. As part of a writing assignment Simon's teacher encourages him to use details from a terrorist attack as an event perpetrated by his parents. After that, as is often typical in an Egoyan film, all hell breaks loose, one important detail at a time, as each character finds out that their version of the truth isn't quite what they expected it to be. The story is a meditation on hate and the fact that hate is often portrayed as binary. Adapting any film to another medium is always difficult but staging a film adaptation is especially so as there is no editing or post-production involved to help portray emotions or events. Kouyoumdjian's pared-down score perfectly accompanies the lyrics and the action that we witness on stage — experimental opera at its best. *Adoration* will be performed again at the LA Opera with Beth Morrison Projects, February 19-23, 2025.

Not surprisingly, much of Kouyoumdjian's work relates back to her the events her family underwent in Lebanon during the Civil War and subsequent Israeli invasions. Her entire family was born in Beirut though Kouyoumdjian grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, once her family had already settled in the United States.

"I remember all that amazing music that my family played on vinyl with Armenian and western instruments, the way the voices would rise to meet the music in exciting ways," she said.

Kouyoumdjian has been to Armenia three times already, the first in 2015 with the Kronos Quartet on the occasion of the Centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide to perform her piece, *Silent Cranes*, at the National Opera. It was a fan-



tastic experience overall, she said, though after the performance Kouyoumdjian experienced the type of unintended silliness that many non-mainstream people or women still are subject to in Armenia. When being toasted, the opera representative thanked her for her dedication to music, and the "sacrifice she had made by not having a husband and children!"

Kouyoumdjian has several other exciting projects up her musical sleeves. She is a composer in focus at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, a huge honor at the national level. She created *to open myself, to scream* in collaboration with projection artist Kevork Mourad. The work is a sonic portrait of the Romani painter and Holocaust survivor Ceija Stojka and received plaudits from all those who attended its performance.

Kouyoumdjian is also a Pulitzer Prize finalist for her staged music-documentary *Paper Pianos*, created along with stage director Nigel Maister, and intricate hand-drawn animations by Mourad, to be performed at the Clarice in Maryland on May 10, 2025. *Paper Pianos* is a multimedia work which explores the dislocation, longing and optimism of refugees. 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). Kouyoumdjian relates the amazing tale that when Yousufi arrived from Afghanistan he had no piano to practice on. In fact this brilliant musician has perfect pitch and in Afghanistan, after the Taliban had destroyed all the pianos in the capital city, Yousufi practiced using a paper reproduction of a keyboard. Kouyoumdjian generously granted him access to her piano at home so that he could practice. The story is telling of the composer's personal qualities and convictions, but also underlines the sometimes-unimaginable harm done by the Taliban not just to women, as has often been highlighted in the press, but to all members of Afghani society.

Finally, Kouyoumdjian's breathtaking collaboration *Andouni* with photographer Scout Tufankjian at the New York Philharmonic, commissioned by "Project 19" debuted to critical acclaim on May 10, 2024 at David Geffen Hall, also at Lincoln Center. Kouyoumdjian and Tufankjian created a new music-documentary hybrid that documented the recent genocide of Artsakh Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. It combined field recordings, interviews, photography, and live musical performance as part of the Project 19 commissioning initiative, which invited 19 women to create new works for the NY Philharmonic. To my mind I detected elements in the music that go back to modern greats such as John Cage and John Adams. Tufankjian has described the piece "a howl of rage and grief at the horror of what has happened to the Artsakhtsi people."

Given the piece's deep, strident and at times guttural resonance and its attention to the pain of the world as we know it, this may well be the best description of Mary Kouyoumdjian's work. As terrible events unfold globally, we need more of that same rage, which the poet Alan Ginsberg expressed in verse in his 1955 classic "Howl." Be that as it may, Kouyoumdjian is an important composer we are sure to hear more from in the future.

COMMENTARY

THE ARMENIAN
**MIRROR
SPECTATOR**
SINCE 1932



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Armenia's Diplomatic Missteps In the US 2024 Elections

By Suren Sargsyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

As a general rule, the elections held in one country can have a significant impact on bilateral relations, global politics, or geopolitical developments between the countries. Naturally, the case of the United States is particularly interesting in this context, as the events taking place there impact the entire world.

One of the best examples of the clearest state policy towards events in another country is Israel's approach to the 2024 US elections. While Israel likely had a preferred candidate, it handled the situation with great care and diplomacy, avoiding any actions that could be seen as favoring one party over the other. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Washington, meeting with both Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris and Republican Donald Trump, carefully maintaining a political balance. Similarly, Israel's ambassador to the US conducted his daily duties with the same level of tact, ensuring that Israel's actions did not appear biased toward either side.

Certainly, many countries had a clear interest in the outcome of the US elections, including NATO and EU member states, Ukraine and Iran. However, none of these countries violated the established norms or openly displayed bias in the US domestic political process.

In addition to heads of states and political leaders, foreign ambassadors accredited to the United States also play a major role, representing the interests of the sending state.

From this perspective, it is interesting to study the messages that the Armenian government conveyed to the Armenian-American community during the election campaign through one of its information and propaganda tools, the Public TV Company of Armenia. Also worthy of special attention is the daily activities of Ambassador Lilit Makunts throughout the entire US pre-election period, which contain relevant messages. Since Trump announced his nomination on November 16, 2022, Makunts has met with Democrats 20 times and with Republicans only 8 times in the Capitol.

It is interesting to note Ambassador Makunts' participation in the Conventions of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Diplomatic representatives accredited in the US were invited to attend both events. However, apart from posting about her participation in the Republican convention, Lilit Makunts did not make any further comments on whether she had met with the representatives of the Republican Party.

Meanwhile, as for the Democratic National Convention, Makunts not only participated in the event, but also organized a working visit to Chicago (Illinois), a vibrant Democratic state where the convention was taking place, met with some representatives of the local Armenian community, and also ensured the participation of the Armenian National Assembly delegation, consisting exclusively of deputies from the Civil Contract party, in the event. Taking into account the specific nature of the US elections, it was either necessary to participate in the events of both US parties at the same level, or by participating only in the Democratic National Convention, it was necessary not to present it to the public in a way that would be perceived as biased.

This approach becomes even more crucial when considering the dynamics of the US electoral system. In the US elections, particularly in swing states, every citizen's vote is crucial, as the votes in these states are often distributed almost equally between candidates. In swing states, the Armenian community is distributed as follows according to one estimate: Nevada – 35,000; Pennsylvania – 48,000; Michigan – 72,000; Georgia – 12,000; Arizona – 22,000; North Carolina – 12,000; and Wisconsin – 17,000.

Even if there were only 10,000 Armenian voters in each of these states, the outcome of their vote could have a serious impact on the election outcome. In light of this, it's worth highlighting how each candidate was presented by the Public Television Channel. Let's analyze a few interviews.

In particular, on November 5, the Public TV Company of Armenia hosted Arnold Bleyan, head of the Armenian Center for Democracy and Security Affairs who spoke about the US presidential election, its importance for our region, and the statements of the presidential candidates. The Public Television advertised the interview as "Open Platform: When making their choice, it would be wise for Armenian-Americans to consider the national interests of Armenia."

The guest speaker specifically mentioned the following points: "We are at a decisive moment, and Armenian-Americans must understand this as well. I hope they will be wise and vote in favor of the Republic of Armenia [in favor of Kamala Harris]. From now on, they should not blame Armenia if any problems arise in the country, whether in the form of military aggression or economic collapse... Trump will end the war in Ukraine while respecting the principle of non-use of force. This will give everyone a free hand, including Azerbaijan... Today, Armenia's statehood exists thanks to the United States — this is a fact, an undeniable fact."

In turn, Californian-Armenian activist Viken Hovsepian, while being hosted by Petros Ghazaryan on Public TV, specifically noted: "Who can say that if I want the United States to have a policy in favor of Armenia, then I have to vote for Trump? That is absurd... At least there must be other considerations. First of all, Trump is much closer to Azerbaijan, even to some circles in Turkey, through his business, and moreover, he has carried out activities in Russia with Azerbaijani businessmen. There are no serious Armenian relations with Trump that would balance this out."

And in an interview with Public Radio, Harut Sassounian, publisher of the *California Courier* newspaper, noted: "Trump is a very unpredictable candidate. No one knows what he will do; often, even he doesn't know what he's going to do. He decides based on whatever comes to his mind at the moment."

It is clear that during the Biden administration, the US adopted a more active and proactive policy in the region and in relations with Armenia, and yes, Kamala Harris' policy would most likely be a continuation of this policy. However, adopting a clearly selective approach — such as supporting a specific candidate and steering the Armenian community toward that candidate was not a very wise decision and most importantly not in the interests of Armenia.

Naturally, all the figures invited to these interviews were guided by their own perceptions of the results of the US presidential elections and their impact on Armenia, but it is not the experts' opinions that pose a problem. The problem lies in the fact that the Public TV Company of Armenia did not even try to invite such figures who would express opposing opinions in order to maintain at least a seeming balance. Such an approach can be perceived as an attempt to interfere in the US elections and steer the Armenian community in the United States toward one candidate.

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

The World Needs a Pro-Human AI Agenda

By Daron Acemoglu

These are uncertain and confusing times. Not only are we contending with pandemics, climate change, societal aging in major economies and rising geopolitical tensions, but artificial intelligence is poised to change the world as we know it. What remains to be seen is how quickly things will change and for whose benefit.

If you listen to industry insiders or technology reporters at leading newspapers, you might think artificial general intelligence

(AGI) — AI technologies that can perform any human cognitive task — is just around the corner. Accordingly, there is much debate about whether these amazing capabilities will make us prosperous beyond our wildest dreams (with less hyperbolic observers estimating more than 1-2% faster GDP growth), or instead bring about the end of human civilization, with superintelligent AI models becoming our masters.

But if you look at what is going on in the real economy, you will not find any break with the past so far. There is no ev-

idence yet of AI delivering revolutionary productivity benefits. Contrary to what many technologists promised, we still need radiologists (more than before, in fact), journalists, paralegals, accountants, office workers, and human drivers. As I noted recently, we should not expect much more than about 5 percent of what humans do to be replaced by AI over the next decade. It will take significantly longer for AI models to acquire the judgment, multi-dimensional reasoning

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COMMENTARY

MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

Every Time Pashinyan Opens his Mouth, He Harms Armenia's Interests

I just received the first volume of a valuable book published in Yerevan in 2021 that makes public for the first time some of the 8,000 handwritten letters by survivors of the 1894-96 Turkish massacres of 300,000 Armenians in Western Armenia (present-day Turkey), organized by Sultan Abdul Hamid II.

This unique book, authored by Vera Sahakyan and published by the Matenadaran, the repository of ancient manuscripts and documents in Yerevan, reproduces the eyewitness testimonies of 200 Armenian survivors of the Turkish massacres from the 28 villages in the Bulanekh province of the Mush region who had fled to Eastern Armenia. The heart-wrenching letters were sent to Catholicos of All-Armenians Mkrtich Khrimian (1893-1907), known endearingly as Khrimian Hayrig, located in Echmiadzin, the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church, seeking his compassionate aid for their basic necessities of food and lodging.

The letters of the Armenian survivors were kept for several decades in the archives of Echmiadzin and subsequently transferred to Matenadaran. The author plans to publish several more volumes in the future to cover the rest of the 8,000 letters. Many of the letters in volume 1 were translated into English by Lucine Minasian.

Here are excerpts from some of the letters written to the Catholicos by the Armenian survivors of the 1894-96 Turkish massacres:

— On October 29, 1896, Yeghiazar Hagopian, a refugee from Bulanekh's Kakarlu village of Mush, wrote: "I was able to flee the barbaric Kurdish killings. Besides totally looting us, they murdered my son, and I barely escaped, only losing the fingers of my right hand. It's already been four months that I have been wandering around here begging for alms.... My family, famished and naked, is impatiently waiting for me back in the homeland. I beseech you to at least grant me some travel money."

— On October 14, 1894, Mardiros Mouradian, an inhabitant from Khoshgaldi village of Lower Bulanekh, wrote: "The unlawful Tajiks [Turks] attacked my lamentable and poor family beating us with stones on the one hand, and fatally shooting my 20-year-old son on the other hand. They pillaged my whole fortune and even disrobed us."

— On July 11, 1895, Parish Priest Hovhannes Der Bedrossian from Molahkant village of Mush wrote: "Being attacked by Kurds and Hamidian troops, we abandoned our homes and possessions and barely fled secretly to Russia to survive. Now, we are wandering poor, delusional, famished... bereft of a single piece of dry bread."

— On January 2, 1896, Hagop Levonians from Bulanekh's Liz village

wrote: "Our intention is self-defense -- we appeal to you that you will free us, our people, and our homeland from the Turkish iron yoke. Hand us a few weapons so we can go and reach our eight friends who have been writing us letter after letter, asking us to reach them soon."

— On January 13, 1897, Mkrtich Haroutyounyan from Bulanekh's Khrishtam Kadouk village wrote: "We barely survived the atrocities...and freed ourselves from the pitiless claws of the furious Ottoman government.... I plead for some rags and some rubles that will cover my travel costs, so I can protect my family from the frost and attain daily sustenance for them during the winter-time."

— On September 30, 1895, Yaghush Mkrtichian (five people) and Yalduz Mardirosian (six people), two widows of refugee families from Bulanekh's Kharakhlo village of Mush, wrote: "Both of us have been widowed for almost two years, as the heads [of our families] were killed by the Kurds. Being frightened, we fled here. They took everything we owned. They didn't leave anything -- neither cattle nor possessions."

— On March 15, 1894, Baghdasar Margosian from Keakarlu village of Mush wrote: "Enduring numerous tortures and sufferings, we could barely free ourselves from death. The unlawful warden released us from prison, demanding 80 pieces of gold. Afterwards, they looted all my movable and immovable property and forcibly imprisoned my son."

— On July 17, 1895, Sahag Garabedian from Hamzasheikh village of Bulanekh Province wrote: "Because of the barbarity committed by the government and the Turks, we left our homeland and fled to Russia. My father died. Now there are five of us, including my old mother. Presently, my family lives in a hut with lice in the Armidlu village."

— On April 19, 1894, Priest Mateos Der Kevorkian from Bulanekh village and Sahag Serovpian from Karakilise village wrote: "Since September 1893, the Kurds and Turks of Turkey have been torturing our Armenians intensely and oppressing them. They have been looting our harvested wheat. They have been pillaging our stored wheat. At nights they commit adultery with our wives and then kill them. When the Armenian laborers come back from abroad, they rob their money and homes and kill them. Eighteen families from Hamzasheikh village were forcibly converted into Turkish religion. Three of them were killed and now there is an order to hang 28 people.... Effendis and aghas forcibly demand 40-50 gold pieces from Armenian peasants or kill them. Prelate Priest Nercess has been sentenced to two years in jail. They forcibly demanded from him 450 gold pieces which were collected by passing a plate [in church] and now he is in prison. Effendis and aghas are forcibly taking over the Armenian villages, harming and torturing people...."

This is a valuable book because it:

- 1) Documents the 1894-96 massacres of Armenians through eyewitness accounts of the survivors;
- 2) Gives present-day Armenians the opportunity to find the names of their ancestors who used to live in Western Armenia;
- 3) Reveals that some of the little-known villages in the region were indeed inhabited by Armenians.

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abilities, and the social skills necessary for most jobs, and for AI and computer vision technologies to advance to the point where they can be combined with robots to perform high-precision physical tasks (such as manufacturing and construction).

Of course, these are predictions, and predictions can always be wrong. With industry insiders becoming even more vocal about the pace of progress, perhaps game-changing AI breakthroughs will come sooner than expected. But the history of AI is replete with ambitious predictions by insiders. In the mid-1950s, Marvin Minsky, arguably the grandfather of AI, predicted that machines would surpass humans within just a few years, and when it didn't happen, he remained adamant. In 1970, he was still insisting that, "In from three to eight years we will have a machine with the general intelligence of an average human being. I mean a machine that will be able to read Shakespeare, grease a car, play office politics, tell a joke, have a fight. At that point the machine will begin to educate itself with fantastic speed. In a few months it will be at genius level and a few months after that its powers will be incalculable."

Similarly optimistic predictions have recurred since then, only to be abandoned in periodic "AI winters." Could this time be different?

To be sure, generative AI's capabilities far exceed anything that the industry has produced before. But that does not mean that the industry's expected timelines are correct. AI developers have an interest in creating the impression of imminent revo-

lutionary breakthroughs, in order to stoke demand and attract investors.

But even a slower pace of progress is cause for concern, given the damage that AI can already do: deepfakes, voter and consumer manipulation, and mass surveillance are just the tip of the iceberg. AI can also be leveraged for large-scale automation, even when such uses make little sense. We already have examples of digital technologies being introduced into workplaces without a clear idea of how they will increase productivity, let alone boost existing workers' productivity. With all the hype surrounding AI, many businesses are feeling the pressure to jump on the bandwagon before they know how AI can help them.

Such trend-chasing has costs. In my work with Pascual Restrepo, we show that so-so automation represents the worst of both worlds. If a technology is not yet capable of increasing productivity by much, deploying it extensively to replace human labor across a variety of tasks yields all pain and no gain. In my own forecast — where AI replaces about 5% of jobs over the next decade — the implications for inequality are quite limited. But if hype prevails and companies adopt AI for jobs that cannot be done as well by machines, we may get higher inequality without much of a compensatory boost to productivity.

We therefore cannot rule out the worst of all possible worlds: none of AI's transformative potential, but all of the labor displacement, misinformation, and manipulation. This would be tragic, not only because of the negative effects on workers and on social and political life, but also because it

would represent a huge missed opportunity.

Progress for Whom?

It is both technically feasible and socially desirable to have a different type of AI — one with applications that complement workers, protect our data and privacy, improve our information ecosystem and strengthen democracy.

AI is an information technology. Whether in its predictive form (such as the recommendation engines on social-media platforms) or its generative form (large language models), its function is to sift through massive amounts of information and identify relevant patterns. This capability is a perfect antidote to what ails us. We live in an age where information is abundant, but useful information is scarce. Everything that you could want is on the internet (along with many things you don't want), but good luck finding what you need for a specific job or purpose.

Useful information drives productivity growth, and as David Autor, Simon Johnson and I have argued, it is more important than ever in today's economy. Many occupations — from nurses and educators to electricians, plumbers, blue-collar workers and other modern craft workers — are hampered by the lack of specific information and training to deal with increasingly complex problems. Why are some students falling behind? Which equipment and vehicles need preemptive maintenance? How can we detect faulty functioning in complex products such as airplanes? This is exactly the kind of information AI can provide.

When applied to such problems, AI can deliver much larger productivity gains than

those envisioned in my own meager forecast. If AI is used for automation, it will replace workers; but if it is used to provide better information to workers, it will increase the demand for their services, and thus their earnings.

Unfortunately, three formidable barriers are blocking us from this path. The first is the fixation on AGI. Dreams of superintelligent machines are pushing the industry to ignore the real potential of AI as an information technology that can help workers. Accurate knowledge in the relevant domain is what matters, but this is not what the industry has been investing in. Chatbots that can write Shakespearean sonnets will not empower electricians to perform sophisticated new tasks. But if you genuinely believe that AGI is near, why bother helping electricians?

The problem is not just the obsession with AGI. As a general principle, tools should do things that humans are not good at doing efficiently. This is what hammers and calculators do, and it is what the internet could have done if it had not been corrupted by social media. But the tech industry has adopted the opposite perspective, favoring digital tools that can substitute for humans rather than complementing them. This is partly because many tech leaders underestimate human talent and exaggerate human limitations and fallibility. Obviously, humans make mistakes; but they also bring a unique blend of perspectives, talents, and cognitive tools to every task. We need an industry paradigm that, rather than celebrating the superiority of

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Foreign Minister Mirzoyan Visits International Criminal Court

THE HAGUE (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Armenia has been at the forefront of international action for strengthening of policies and practices against the crime of genocide, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said in his remarks at the 23rd Session of the Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal

Forum Against the Crime of Genocide in regular observance of the International Day of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime, designated by the UN General Assembly Resolution. Armenia is proud to be the penholder of that Resolution.”

It was the first time a representative of the Republic of Armenia addressed the Session of the Assembly as a full-fledged member to the Rome Statute.

On the same day, he met with the President of the Assembly of States Parties to the ICC Päivi Kaukoranta.

The two discussed issues of cooperation among member states to ensure the effectiveness of the ICC. It was emphasized that in the current period, marked by numerous challenges, a strong commitment to upholding

international legal norms, ensuring the rule of law, and supporting the functioning of the Court is more important than ever.

Accordingly, the priorities of Armenia’s cooperation with the ICC were touched upon.

Mirzoyan and Kaukoranta also exchanged views on the potential role of international justice mechanisms in ensuring lasting peace.



Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan in the Hague

Court on Monday, December 2.

“As a long-standing supporter of the genocide prevention agenda, Armenia has been at the forefront of international action for strengthening of policies and practices against the crime of genocide, as well as building a global community network to advance the methods of prevention,” Mirzoyan said.

“Hence, Armenia initiated the Global

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machines, emphasizes their greatest strength: augmenting and expanding human capabilities.1

A second obstacle is underinvestment in humans. AI can be a tool for human empowerment only if we invest as much in training and skills. AI tools complementing workers will amount to nothing if most humans cannot use them, or cannot acquire and process the information they provide. It took humans a long time to figure out how to manage the information from new sources such as the printing press, radio, TV, and the internet, but the timeline for AI will be accelerated (even if the “imminent AGI” scenario remains so much hot air).

The only way to ensure that humans benefit from AI, rather than being fooled by it, is to invest in training and education at all levels. That means going beyond the trite advice to invest in skills that will be complementary to AI. While that is of course necessary, it is woefully insufficient. What we really need is to teach students and workers to coexist with AI tools and use them in the right way.

The third barrier is the tech industry’s business models. We will not get better AI unless tech companies invest in it; but the sector is now more concentrated than ever, and the dominant firms are completely devoted to the quest for AGI and human-replacing and human-manipulating applications. A huge share of the industry’s revenues comes from digital ads (based on collecting extensive

data from users and getting them hooked on platforms and their offerings), and from selling tools and services for automation.

But new business models are unlikely to emerge by themselves. The incumbents have built large empires and monopolized key resources — capital, data, talent — leaving aspiring entrants at an increasing disadvantage. Even if some new player breaks through, it is more likely to be acquired by one of the tech giants than to challenge their business model.

The bottom line is that we need an anti-AGI, pro-human agenda for AI. Workers and citizens should be empowered to push AI in a direction that can fulfill its promise as an information technology. But for that to happen, we will need a new narrative in the media, policymaking circles, and civil society, and much better regulations and policy responses. Governments can help to change the direction of AI, rather than merely reacting to issues as they arise. But first policymakers must recognize the problem.

(Daron Acemoglu, a 2024 Nobel laureate in economics and Institute Professor of Economics at MIT, is a co-author [with James A. Robinson] of *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* [Profile, 2019] and a co-author [with Simon Johnson] of *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity* [PublicAffairs, 2023]. This commentary originally appeared on the website www.project-syndicate.org on November 29.)



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