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Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin Bemoans Armenia's Ills In Christmas Message

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Catholicos Karekin II, the supreme head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, listed “lust for power” among Armenia’s problems on Monday, January 6, as he celebrated a Christmas mass once again boycotted by the country’s political leadership.

During the liturgy held at the church’s main cathedral in Echmiadzin, Karekin renewed his calls for Armenians, who celebrate Christmas on January 6, to adhere to their Christian faith in the face of grave external and internal challenges facing their homeland.

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Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II walks out of Holy Echmiadzin on January 6, when the Armenian Church celebrates the Feast of Holy Nativity

Azerbaijan Announces Trial Date of Illegally Arrested Karabakh Armenian Leaders

YEREVAN (News.am) — Azerbaijan on January 6, the date Armenians celebrate the Feast of Holy Nativity, announced the date of the trial in the “criminal case” against the Armenian military and political leadership of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), who were captured during their forcible displacement from the homeland.

According to the Azerbaijani news outlet APA, the preparatory hearing for the “criminal case” has been scheduled for January 17.

The indictment for the “criminal case” was approved by the Prosecutor General of Azerbaijan on December 16 and sent to the relevant authorities for consideration at the Baku Military Court. The case has been assigned to Judge Zeynal Aghayev, the chairman of the court.

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Bishop Armash Nalbandian, far left, at meeting of Syrian Christian clerical leaders with Ahmad al-Sharaa, center, at the Syrian Presidential Palace, on December 31, 2024 (photo courtesy Bishop Armash Nalbandian Facebook page)

Damascus Bishop Nalbandian Voices Armenian Concerns During Syrian Transition

By Aram Arkun
Mirror-Spectator Staff

WATERTOWN — Syrian Armenians and other Christians face a situation of uncertainty after the Sunni Islamist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) overthrew the Assad regime and took control of Damascus on December 8 last year. Bishop Armash Nalbandian, the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus, has been a prominent voice for local Armenians, meeting with HTS officials and giving interviews to prominent German, British, Turkish, Armenian and other international media outlets over the last few weeks about the changes taking place. He gave an interview on January 3

to the *Mirror-Spectator*.

Bishop Nalbandian is a native of Aleppo who went to Armenia to study at the Gevorgian Theological Seminary. Afterwards, he served as a pastor to the Armenian community in Germany but he returned to Syria in 2004, where he was elected as Primate in Damascus.

Armenians have lived in Syria for several millennia, but a majority of the current community is formed of descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Civil war in Syria from 2011 until 2019, followed by Covid, and poor economic conditions, led to the shrinking of the community, from a peak of 80-100,000 to what many estimate as low as 20,000 currently, with many emigrating to Armenia, the United States, Europe, Australia and

elsewhere.

In Damascus, Nalbandian said that based on the numbers of school children in Armenian schools and the registered visits of priests to homes for blessing ceremonies, there are at present around 750 Armenian families and a community of around 2,500-3,000.

After the collapse of the Assad regime, some Syrian Armenians left their homes, with many going to the Syrian coastal regions, like Latakia, or Beirut, Lebanon. When they saw that the situation in Aleppo and Damascus did not appear dangerous, they returned. Nalbandian concluded, “I would say there is not a huge [new] wave of emigration of Armenians from Syria so far.”

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Teen Karabakh Blast Victim Heads Toward a Bright Future

By Alin K. Gregorian
Mirror-Spectator Staff

WATERTOWN — The series of horrors that befell Artsakh starting in 2020 with the loss of much of its territory and ending in 2023 with the expulsion of its population and its total take over by Azerbaijan were felt by those in the diaspora yet obviously from a safe distance. Karabakh natives who lived through this experience were scarred in a different way.

One young man and his family endured not only the bitter loss of their home and land to usurpers, but lost so much more during the inferno that engulfed a depot in Berkadzor, near Stepanakert, on September 25, 2023, where citizens of the city, desperate to flee before they were overrun by the Azeri army, had gathered, after hearing that there was possibly fuel available for sale. In the ensuing fire, more than 220 died and more than 300 sustained injuries.

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NEWS from ARMENIA

3 Injured in Warehouse Fire in Yerevan

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Three people were injured as a result of a fire in a warehouse at the Bagratashen Border Crossing Point, on January 3, authorities have said.

Internal Affairs Ministry spokesperson Narek Sargsyan said that firefighters contained the fire at 14:24. The 911 call on the fire was made at 12:43.

The three injured persons were taken to the hospital after receiving first aid by rescuers and police officers at the scene.

Winter Military Draft Kicks off in Armenia

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — The winter conscription for compulsory military service commenced in Armenia on January 7.

A solemn ceremony was held at the Sardarapat Memorial Complex, featuring a prayer and a wreath-laying tribute, the Echmiadzin City Hall reported.

The blessing ceremony was led by Archbishop Sion Adamyan, Primate of the Diocese of Armavir, who prayed for peace in Armenia and the safety of all soldiers during their service.

Armenian Expert Warns Of Rising Tensions over 'Zangezur Corridor' in 2025

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — Turkologist Varuzhan Geghamyan has reacted to Azerbaijan's false reports about the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" through Armenia, highlighting Iran's steadfast opposition to it.

Citing the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Azerbaijani media reports alleged on January 6 that Iran and Turkey would soon start talks regarding the opening of the extraterritorial corridor via Armenia's Syunik Province.

"Iran promptly denied the reports. However, the Azerbaijani disinformation campaign highlights three critical points:

1. The issue of the so-called "Turanian Corridor" will likely face heightened pressure in 2025, driven by various factors, including construction deadlines. Azerbaijan's recent attack is an early indication of this escalating campaign.

2. Iran, not Armenia, remains staunchly opposed to the corridor. However, increasing Western pressure on Iran could change Tehran's position benefitting Armenia,

3. The Azerbaijani-Turkish campaign against Armenia extends beyond the battlefield into the information domain. The recent campaign highlights the urgency of preventing the dissemination of Turkish propaganda," he said in a social media post on January 7.

"In the coming weeks, we will provide a comprehensive analysis of the so-called 'Zangezur Corridor' to shed light on the threats posed by it and outline countermeasures against it," Geghamyan added.

Rise of Electric Cars in Armenia: What's Driving Their Popularity?

By Gayane Asryan

YEREVAN (JAM News) — Electric cars are no longer a rarity on the streets of Yerevan, and their presence has grown significantly. Over the past two years, vehicle sales companies in Armenia have shifted their focus to electric cars, which have become highly sought after. Sales agents report that demand is soaring and are confident that it will continue to rise in the near future.

How is it that car enthusiasts, who once equated engine power, brand, and even car color with social status, have now embraced predominantly Chinese electric vehicles?

According to sales managers, electric cars offer three major advantages: they are more affordable, economical to maintain, and environmentally friendly.

Last year, Arshak sold his car and bought an electric vehicle. For the past five months, he has been driving it and speaks only of its advantages.

"My car was German-made and had high maintenance costs. Plus, I had been driving it for 12 years, and it was outdated. Problems kept cropping up, and expenses kept rising. On my friends' advice, I decided to sell it and buy an electric car," Arshak explains.

With his new car, he has eliminated repair costs. Charging the electric vehicle costs him a maximum of 25,000–30,000 drams per month (\$63–76), whereas fueling his old car used to take about 70,000 drams (\$180) out of the family budget each month.

"I initially wanted to travel to China to pick out an electric car myself. But after calculating all the expenses, I realized it was better to work with importers. There were good options, and I was able to get a new car for \$26,500. So far, I see only positive factors. I've heard about problems with electric cars, but I haven't encountered any myself," Arshak says.

In his view, the electric car boom in Armenia is largely due to the government's approach to the issue: "They are imported without customs duties. Essentially, the government is solving two problems. First, the country's vehicle fleet is being modernized. Second, there's a transition to cars that don't pollute the air or cause harm. And people understand this."

According to a government decision, 7,400 electric vehicles were set to be imported into Armenia in 2024 with a customs benefit, specifically a zero percent duty rate.

Official data shows that, on average, 22 electric cars were delivered to Armenia daily throughout 2024.

As of October 1, the quota for electric vehicles eligible for the zero-duty rate had already been exhausted. As a result, the government revised its decision, allowing an additional 600 electric vehicles to be imported under preferential terms by the end of the year.

Interest Continues to Grow

Evgenia Nushikyan, a sales manager at one of Armenia's leading car import companies, personally sold 82 electric vehicles this year alone. She considers this an unprecedented figure and is confident that sales momentum will continue in the coming years.

She highlights past issues with importing cars from the U.S. market, where vehicles often didn't match their descriptions, re-

quiring costly and time-consuming returns.

"In contrast to electric vehicle markets in the U.S. or other countries, when working with China, our specialists are in direct contact with buyers at dealerships. They provide detailed information about the vehicles. The likelihood of disappointment or choosing the wrong car is practically zero," Nushikyan explains.

She also attributes the high sales volumes to accessible credit options:

"People can purchase an electric vehi-

as well:

"Interestingly, these cars have been tested in Armenia's various climatic zones and conditions, with no problems recorded during trials. Additionally, warranties are provided with each sale."

Considering the income levels of Armenian residents, Nushikyan believes electric vehicles are an excellent choice for middle-income individuals seeking comfortable, economical cars.

From an environmental perspective, she also sees the importance of promoting electric cars: "Unfortunately, many buyers don't mention this or see it as a priority. However, there are cases where affluent clients ask us to sell off their luxury cars and order electric vehicles for the entire family. For 2025, I anticipate even higher sales and more new offerings."

Quotas for 2025

For 2025, a zero-percent import duty has been set for 8,000 electric vehicles.

The State Revenue Committee reminds that to use this year's quota, customs declarations can be submitted, and a customs order can be registered starting January 1 for importing vehicles into Armenia.

Additionally, under the Tax Code, the VAT exemption on electric vehicle imports will remain in effect until January 1, 2026, with no quantitative restrictions for this benefit.

At the end of last year, the government discussed the limited lifespan of car engines, after which they require disposal. Currently, this is managed under the government's solid waste management program. However, with the growing number of vehicles, additional resources will be needed to address this issue.

As a potential way to reduce waste volume or delay the disposal process as much as possible, the government considered offering benefits exclusively for importing new electric vehicles manufactured within the past two years.



cle with a 10 percent down payment and an interest rate of around 14 percent. A few years ago, our clients were buying cars at very different price points. Now, electric vehicle prices are generally between \$20,000 and \$45,000."

Nushikyan assures that electric cars are both comfortable and cost-effective, which is why she believes they will dominate the Armenian market in the coming years:

"Electric vehicles have powerful engines, modern designs, and innovative digital controls for the interior. Most importantly, they are contemporary products that have undergone extensive testing. Without naming specific brands, I can say that these vehicles vary in quality and class, with features that distinguish them from one another."

She also notes that electric car buyers are more often women, tech industry professionals, or individuals who already own multiple cars and want an electric vehicle



Azerbaijan Announces Trial Date of Illegally Arrested Karabakh Armenian Leaders

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Eight former and current members of the military and political leadership of Artsakh are among the Armenians in Azerbaijani captivity. They are former Artsakh presidents Arkady Ghukasyan, Bako Sahakyan and Arayik Harutyunyan, former Artsakh Foreign Minister David Babayan as well as parliament speaker Davit Ishkhanyan, former Artsakh Defense Army commander Levon Mnatsakanyan and deputy commander Davit Manukyan, and former Artsakh Minister of State Ruben Vardanyan.



ARMENIA

Pashinyan Won't Rule Out Disclosing Karabakh Peace Plans

By Ruzana Stepanian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's office said on Tuesday that he may agree to publicize all peace proposals on Nagorno-Karabakh, which had been made by US, Russian and French mediators, in response to calls from his critics.

Pashinyan claimed last month that all those plans considered by Armenia's former governments were about "returning Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan." He said that his "big mistake" was not to make this clear to Armenians after coming to power in 2018.

Former Presidents Levon Ter-Petrosian, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan unanimously countered that Pashinyan continues to distort the history of the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiation process that was mediated by the United States, Russia and France for decades. Pashinyan responded by challenging them to a televised debate on the issue. They all scoffed at the offer.

Ter-Petrosian also challenged Pashinyan to publicize the peace proposals put forward by the US, Russian and French co-chairs of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group from 1994 onwards along with Yerevan's official responses to them.

"That would be a real debate based on facts," the 79-year-old ex-president said in a December 25 statement. "And if you

don't do that, you will prove once again that you are running away from the truth and are busy cowardly dodging historical responsibility."

Answering relevant questions from RFE/RL's Armenian Service submitted last week, Pashinyan's office said he has instructed the Armenian Foreign Ministry to "inventory the negotiation papers available at the ministry" for their possible publication. It said he will decide whether or not



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan greets the US, Russian and French co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group before talks with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Vienna March 29, 2019.

to publicize them after assessing the matter "from the standpoint of Armenia's national security interests."

Some Armenian public figures have also

called for the disclosure of the Karabakh peace proposals. Most of them were based on so-called Madrid Principles which the three mediating powers originally put forward in 2007. This draft framework agreement, repeatedly modified in the following decade, upheld the Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination while calling for their withdrawal from Azerbaijan districts around Karabakh occupied in the early 1990s. Karabakh's internationally recog-

nized status would be determined through a future referendum.

Pashinyan has repeatedly criticized the Madrid Principles since the 2020 war in

Karabakh. In particular, he claimed in 2021 that the mediating powers sought a "surrender of lands" to Azerbaijan and offered the Armenian side nothing in return. The Russian Foreign Ministry bluntly denied the claim at the time.

Pashinyan's office did not mention the Madrid Principles in its written comments to RFE/RL's Armenian Service. It pointed instead to a 1996 statement by the then OSCE chairman-in-office which said Karabakh should have the "highest degree of self-rule within Azerbaijan."

The office also claimed that the prime minister brought up the issue again because he believes "a number of external forces" and their "internal allies" in Armenia are again exploiting the Karabakh issue in a bid to prevent Armenia from becoming a truly independent state. It did not name them.

Armenian opposition leaders say Pashinyan simply keeps trying to absolve himself of blame for Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war and Azerbaijan's subsequent recapture of Karabakh. They say he made the disastrous war inevitable by rejecting the last version of the Madrid Principles drafted in 2019.

French Ambassador Extends 'Special Thoughts' to Karabakh Refugees

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — French Ambassador to Armenia Olivier Decottignies has extended Christmas greetings to the Armenian people.

In his congratulatory message on the platform formerly known as Twitter, on January 6, the ambassador mentioned the forcibly displaced persons of Nagorno-Karabakh.



"Merry Christmas, with special thoughts for the refugees of Nagorno-Karabakh, who are once again celebrating this holiday far from home," the French envoy said in a post on X.

Armenian General Arrested Amid Ongoing Political Frictions

YEREVAN (RFE/RL) — The former deputy chief of the general staff of Armenia's armed forces has been arrested on charges of negligence relating to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, amid ongoing political tensions inside the Caucasus country.

Lieutenant General Tiran Khachatryan was arrested on January 4 and will be detained until his trial. State prosecutors allege that Khachatryan failed to perform his official duties during the 44-day war in 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Khachatryan has denied the accusations and his legal team say they plan to file an appeal. In a January 5 statement, his lawyers called the charges "groundless" and that the detention of the former high-ranking military officer is retribution for his political views and that he is being scapegoated for Armenia's "defeat in the war" with Azerbaijan.

The arrest is another sign of the political fault lines opened up in Armenia following Yerevan's losses to Baku in successive campaigns, which have strained Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's relations

with his country's military and put him under increasing public pressure at home.

The 2020 war, when Azerbaijani forces took control of a chunk of Nagorno-Karabakh, was the second that Azerbaijan and Armenia fought in the last three decades over the breakaway region, which had been under ethnic Armenian separatists' control, but recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan since the 1990s.

That was followed by a decisive one-day military operation in September 2023 that saw Azerbaijani forces take control of the remaining parts of the region.

Khachatryan was awarded the title of National Hero of Armenia in 2020 following the war that year with Azerbaijan, but tensions quickly grew between him and Armenian authorities in its aftermath.

In February 2021, Pashinyan dismissed Khachatryan from his post as deputy chief of the general staff of the armed forces, which led to escalating frictions with the military.

The day after Khachatryan was relieved of his duties, more than 40 of Armenia's

top military officers — including Khachatryan — called for the resignation of the prime minister and his government.

Pashinyan condemned the move as part of a coup attempt to depose him.

As part of the January 4 preliminary hearing, Armenia's investigative committee said that the charges against Khachatryan stem from the "negligent attitude toward the performance of his official duties" in October 2020, including failing to set up adequate defensive lines, which led to Azerbaijani forces making strategic gains.

Khachatryan was also arrested and detained for two months in January 2024 after he fired a gun during a restaurant confrontation. Prosecutors said the former military official injured a bystander at a neighboring table, but Khachatryan denied the charges and said he fired his gun in the air in self-defense.

Following that 2024 arrest, Khachatryan's lawyer claimed to RFE/RL that the case was being exploited by the authorities as an opportunity to silence and intimidate him for his criticism of the government.

Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin Bemoans Armenia's Ills in Christmas Message

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"Internally, our homeland is plagued by falsehoods, lawlessness, malice, revenge, and corrupt course, which breed mistrust, indifference, hostility, and division in our society, causing weakening to the nation," he said. "Alongside these challenges, the distortion of Christian moral perception and our traditional national spiritual values threatens our identity, weakens our national spirit, and ensnares us in the traps of sin and despair.

"Through the mystery of the Holy Nativity, a heavenly invitation is once again extended to us: to walk the Lord's path of love, reconciliation, and righteousness. This call can only be realized through a

Christian way of life. It requires that we do not sacrifice our identity, the security of our people and the welfare of our homeland for the sake of personal comfort and gain. We cannot serve the common good if we are driven by vanity, lust for power, and prioritize self-interest."

"Let us be collaborators, not adversaries; devoted servants, not abusers of position and privilege," added Karekin.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan as well as members of his government and political team were conspicuously absent from the Christmas mass, underscoring their discord with the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Pashinyan's relationship with the church,

to which the vast majority of Armenians belong, has increasingly deteriorated in recent years and especially since the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Karekin and other senior clergymen joined the Armenian opposition in calling for Pashinyan's resignation following Armenia's defeat in the six-week war. They also condemned Pashinyan for recognizing Azerbaijani sovereignty over Karabakh months before Baku recaptured the region in September 2023.

The premier has accused the church of meddling in politics. The government-controlled Armenian Public Television underlined the discord by again breaking with a post-Soviet tradition and refusing to broad-

cast Karekin's New Year's Eve address to the nation just before Pashinyan's message.

In that address aired instead by several private TV channels, Karekin again signaled his continued disapproval of Pashinyan's appeasement policy towards Azerbaijan. He warned against "concessions detrimental to the homeland."

For his part, Pashinyan claimed to have made Armenia much more secure in the past year. In that context, he touted his territorial concessions to Azerbaijan which sparked massive anti-government protests in Yerevan in May and June. The protests were led by a senior clergyman, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan.

INTERNATIONAL

EU Delegation Extends Christmas Greetings

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — The EU Delegation in Armenia has extended Christmas greetings to Armenians.

“The EU Delegation in Armenia wishes everyone a Merry Christmas! May the spirit of this special day inspire us all to build stronger communities and create brighter and transformative opportunities accessible to all,” the EU Delegation in Armenia said in a post on the platform formerly known as Twitter.

Syria Will Receive Floating Power Plants from Turkey, Qatar

DAMASCUS (News.am) — Syria will receive two floating power plants from Turkey and Qatar, which together will provide additional 800 MW of electricity. Khaled Abu Dey, director general of Syria’s General Authority for Electricity Transmission and Distribution, told SANA news agency on January 7.

Syria is suffering from an acute shortage of electricity. Most parts of the country are supplied with electricity for only three hours a day. Earlier, Syria’s interim government said it plans to provide electricity for up to eight hours a day within two months.

“The extent of the damage caused to power lines, generating and transformer stations during the former regime’s rule is very large. We are striving to restore the infrastructure so that the grid can transport electricity efficiently,” Abu Dey stressed.

According to him, the department’s specialists are working on establishing transmission lines from the parking place of the floating stations, which will supply the generated electricity to the national grid.

Turkey Security Forces Carry out Raids against Kurds in Turkey, Syria

ANKARA (News.am/Reuters) — Turkish security forces have carried out raids against Kurds. The operation was held in 17 provinces of Turkey, Minister of Internal Affairs Ali Yerlikaya informed on the platform formerly known as Twitter, on January 7.

As a result, 65 people were detained. They are suspected of having ties with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Also, the minister posted footage from this operation on his X account.

In a separate report by Reuters, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said on January 6 that the eradication of the Kurdish YPG militia in Syria was “imminent,” and that Ankara would not agree to any policy that allowed the YPG to maintain a presence there.

“We are in a position to not only see but also to break any kind of plot in the region,” Fidan said in a joint press conference with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi.



Armenian Ambassador Grigor Hakobyan presents his credentials to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Tehran

Armenia Keen to Deepen Ties With Iran ‘In All Fields’

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia remains committed to deepening its relations with neighboring Iran in all fields, the new Armenian ambassador in Tehran told Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on Tuesday, January 7.

According to the Armenian Foreign Ministry, the diplomat, Grigor Hakobyan, made this clear after handing his credentials to Pezeshkian.

“Ambassador Hakobyan reaffirmed the readiness of the Armenian government to deepen relations with friendly Iran in all directions,” the ministry said in a statement. “The interlocutors touched upon the current agenda of Armenia-Iran relations and emphasized the importance of further

development and deepening of cooperation based on mutual respect and trust.”

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made similar comments during his talks with Pezeshkian held in October in the Russian city of Kazan on the sidelines of a summit of the BRICS group of major emerging economies. Pezeshkian’s office quoted Pashinyan as saying that “Armenia will continue to expand its good relations with Iran under any circumstances.”

The official readouts of those talks did not say whether the two leaders discussed Azerbaijan’s continuing demands for an extraterritorial land corridor to its Nakhichevan exclave that would pass through Armenia’s Syunik region bordering Iran.

Tehran is strongly opposed to the so-called “Zangezur corridor,” fearing a de facto loss of its common border with Armenia.

In October 2023, the Armenian government contracted two Iranian companies to upgrade a 32-kilometer section of Syunik’s main highway leading to the Iranian border. Iran’s Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrzad Bazrpash attended the signing of the \$215 million contract in Yerevan, underscoring its geopolitical significance for the Islamic Republic.

According to Armenian government data, Armenia’s trade with Iran rose by about 5 percent to \$593 million in January-October 2024.

Azerbaijani Anger Over Plane Crash Grows, In Deepening Schism With Russia

By Anton Troianovski

BAKU (New York Times) — President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan on Monday, January 6, excoriated Russia for trying to duck responsibility in the downing of an Azerbaijani passenger jet last month, doubling down on a rare confrontation with the Kremlin that has highlighted Russia’s loss of influence in much of the former Soviet Union.

Meeting with the two surviving flight attendants and with relatives of the crew members who died in the crash, Aliyev said Russian efforts “to hush up this incident” caused “surprise, regret and rightful indignation” in Azerbaijan.

The preliminary investigation into the December 25 crash that killed 38 people made it clear, he said, that had the Russian military and civilian authorities coordinated properly, “this tragedy could have been prevented.” He reiterated his assertion, which has been backed up by footage from the scene and Western assessments, that the plane crashed after being hit by Russian air defenses.

“I can say with confidence that the blame for the fact that Azerbaijani citizens died in this disaster lies with representatives of the Russian Federation,” Aliyev said. “We demand justice, we demand the punishment of the guilty, we demand complete transparency and decent behavior.”

In a departure from protocol, Aliyev



made those televised comments in Russian, rather than in Azerbaijani; analysts described that decision as both a nod of respect to the Russian-speaking relatives of the deceased pilots, as well as a sign that Aliyev wanted to be heard in Moscow.

While President Vladimir V. Putin apologized to Aliyev on December 28 for “the tragic incident” that “took place in Russian airspace,” he stopped short of accept-

ing Russian responsibility for it.

In the aftermath of the crash, pro-government voices in Azerbaijan unleashed rare and withering criticism of Russia, despite the close relationship between Aliyev and Putin, two authoritarian leaders who had increasingly found common ground in confronting the West.

Farid Shafiyev, the chairman of the government-funded Center for Analysis

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INTERNATIONAL

Kazakhstan Caught in the Middle of Simmering Azerbaijani-Russian Tension over Jetliner Crash

Kazakhstan is treading delicately as it strives to keep two feuding neighbors happy amid a row over Russia's accidental shoot-down of an Azerbaijani civilian airliner, which crashed outside the Kazakh city of Aktau. Kazakh officials have little to gain and a lot to lose as they oversee the crash investigation.

Relations between Azerbaijan and Russia remain fraught as Azerbaijani officials await the results of the official crash investigation. Kazakhstan's vice minister of transportation, Talgat Lastayev, announced December 30 that preliminary findings are expected to be released in late January.

Azerbaijani-Russian tension revolves around the Kremlin's reluctance to admit Russian air defenses brought the plane down on December 25, killing 38 of the 67 individuals on board. Kazakhstan got caught in the middle because the stricken jet, which had been bound for Grozny in the Russian region of Chechnya, crossed the Caspian Sea to make a crash landing in Aktau. That fact thrust Kazakhstan into a key role in an investigation in which the principal actors — Azerbaijan and Russia — have starkly differing agendas.

In the face of Russian silence over culpability for the crash, Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev has pressed for a transparent probe. At the same time, he has accused Kremlin of trying to cover up its responsibility for the tragedy, pointing out that Russian officials initially offered several “absurd” alternate theories before evidence of the shoot-down came to light. Government-friendly news outlets in Baku even accused Russia of prompting the jet to attempt a landing in Aktau in the hope that it would crash into the Caspian, thus erasing all evidence of Russian involvement. Russia's approach so far suggests the Kremlin is far from eager to see all the facts come out.

Ultimately, some of the 29 survivors have provided testimony substantiating a shoot-down, and the intact rear section of the plane shows signs of being hit by anti-aircraft flak. The black boxes have been recovered and sent to Brazil for analysis.

Despite their country's central position in the investigation, Kazakh officials have tried to remain aloof from the festering controversy. In the first hours after the crash, Kazakh officials appeared to amplify alterna-

tive theories pushed by Russia to explain the tragedy, including the since discredited claim that an oxygen tank inside the aircraft exploded. Kazakh officials also initially backed a Russian proposal that a CIS commission handle the investigation, which would have given Moscow expanded influence over the probe's scope and final report.

As evidence of a shoot-down, including survivor accounts, continued to mount, Kazakhstan has adopted a decidedly neutral tone. During the last days of December, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has had telephone conversations with both his Azerbaijani and Russian counterparts, Aliyev and Vladimir Putin, according to the presidential press service, which was notably silent on the substance of those discussions.

State-controlled media in Kazakhstan has largely refrained from reporting on what caused the crash. The leitmotif of official publications is that Kazakhstan is making every effort to find out what really happened. In recent days, Kazakh officials have been scrupulous in saying their actions are guided by international guidelines. For example, Transport Minister Marat Karabayev cited the International Civil Aviation Organization's Chicago Convention in explaining why the crashed jet's black boxes were sent to Brazil, action that seemed sure to rankle Russia, given the Kremlin's apparent desire to suppress evidence of a shoot-down.

“Kazakhstan stands for objectivity in investigation of air disaster,” stated a December 30 commentary published by the government newspaper *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, quoting a Kazakh political scientist, Eduard Poletaev. “The decision to send on-board recorders for decoding to Brazil is a manifestation of the independence, sovereignty and impartiality of Kazakhstan.”

Independent media outlets in Kazakhstan have covered the controversy over the crash's cause. Accounts offered by *Orda.kz*, for example, have tended to highlight the assertions made by Aliyev and Western officials supporting the notion of Russian responsibility for the tragedy.

The reasons why Kazakh leaders are eager to avoid angering either Azerbaijan or Russia over their handling of the investigation are clear: both countries are

key economic partners for Kazakhstan, and any hiccup in relations can have extensive financial repercussions for Astana.

One source of leverage for Russia is the pipeline that connects oil produced in Kazakhstan's Tengiz oil field to export markets via a pipeline and oil terminal at the Russian port of Novorossiysk under the auspices of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium. The pipeline handles about 80 percent of Tengiz oil exports.

Russia, as a means of either influencing Kazakh decision-making or expressing its displeasure with Astana's actions, could disrupt pipeline operations. “Moscow can stop the transportation of Kazakh oil to Europe under some pretext such as the repair of the CPC infrastructure, as they did during the summer of 2022,” Talgat Ismagambetov, a political scientist at the Almaty Institute of Philosophy, Politics and Religion, said in an interview. In such an instance, “Kazakhstan could suffer big losses again, and this would be a warning [or] punishment from Russia.”

At this point, Kazakhstan may have even more to lose by alienating Azerbaijan. The two countries are key transit nodes for East-West trade via the Middle Corridor route. In addition, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are partners in a developing consortium to ship solar- and wind-generated power to Western markets.

“For Astana, Baku is a very important partner, and in the future, an even more important partner, especially in terms of the joint development of the Trans-Caspian route,” Ismagambetov said.

While Russia maintains its silence about the investigation, Aliyev has voiced approval of Kazakhstan's actions so far, describing the Kazakh emergency response to the crash and outpouring of public sympathy for the victims as “what true friendship and brotherhood look like.”

Tokayev's diplomatic background has proven beneficial in helping Kazakhstan negotiate a tricky situation so far, according to Ismagambetov. “Tokayev has acted subtly because he is a professional diplomat and this is his instinct,” he said.

(This report originally appeared on *Eurasianet.org* on January 2.)

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of International Relations in Baku, Azerbaijan, said in a phone interview that Russia's “imperial arrogance” was on display in its obfuscation of the circumstances of the crash.

Referring to Russia's failure to acknowledge its culpability, Shafiyev said: “They still look down on all these former Soviet countries.”

Russia has been largely silent on the crash in recent days. There was no comment from the Kremlin on Monday, and Russian state media provided only sparse coverage of Aliyev's address.

Shafiyev said that Moscow's muted response may reflect its confidence in its commanding position across the post-Soviet world. But he added that this confidence may be misplaced, pointing to the stunning collapse of the pro-Russian regime in Syria last month as evidence of how quickly its fortunes can change.

“For the moment, they can feel very comfortable that they are still a kind of big power, but over time, that might change,” he said.

Across the former Soviet Union, Russia's grip keeps showing signs of strain. Azerbaijan's archenemy, Armenia, no longer sees Russia as the guarantor of its security and is looking to the West and to Iran for support. In Central Asia, China is ascendant, as the former Soviet republics there view Russia as weakened and distracted by its war in Ukraine.

And just last week, another crack emerged in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova. The Jan. 1 halt of gas to the region from Russia, a consequence of the war in Ukraine, has raised questions about Russia's ability to maintain a loyal outpost on Europe's southeastern edge.

By comparison, Azerbaijan had appeared to be a more positive story for Moscow. Putin made a two-day state visit in August, complete with footage that showed him relaxing in shirtsleeves with Aliyev. The head of Russia's foreign intelligence agency visited in September, casting Azerbaijan as an ally in countering Western efforts to undermine “internal political stability in our states.”

But last month's crash has illuminated the limits of that partnership — and prompted Aliyev's striking willingness to assail his country's far more powerful neighbor to the north.

Flush with fossil fuel revenues and brimming with confidence after defeating Armenia in a long-running conflict in 2023, the autocratic Aliyev, 63, is seizing on the aftermath of the crash to shed any semblance of being dependent on Putin.

The Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 jet with 67 people on board crashed in a ball of black smoke and orange flames on the shores of the Caspian Sea in Kazakhstan after failing to land at its destination, the southern Russian city of Grozny. Putin told Aliyev three days later that Rus-

sian air defenses were battling Ukrainian drones in the area as the jet approached, according to a Kremlin statement.

Aliyev said on December 29 that this explanation and Putin's limited apology wouldn't be enough. Russia “must acknowledge its guilt,” he said, and punish those responsible. In Monday's televised meeting, Aliyev went further, declaring that “there are very serious issues here that constitute a crime.”

The airspace above Grozny was only closed after the plane was fired upon, Aliyev said.

“If there was a threat to Russian airspace, the captain of the plane should have been immediately informed about it,” Aliyev said.

Aliyev repeated his claim that a Moscow-based aviation authority that typically investigates plane crashes in much of the former Soviet Union, including Azerbaijan, couldn't be trusted to carry out a fair investigation — another striking rebuke to Putin's government.

Kazakhstan has agreed to send the plane's black boxes to Brazil, the country where the aircraft manufacturer Embraer is based.

Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, told a Kazakh newspaper in an interview published Friday that sending the black boxes to Brazil was the only way “to ensure a fair and unbiased investigation.”

Kazakhstan is another former Soviet re-

public that has sought, cautiously, to distance itself from Russia since its invasion of Ukraine. The Azerbaijani news media has praised Kazakhstan for displaying “impartiality and objectivity” in investigating the crash rather than helping Russia to cover it up.

Aliyev said the black boxes could explain why the plane crossed the Caspian Sea to crash-land in Kazakhstan, rather than make an emergency landing at a closer airport in Russia.

Russia's top aviation official said the plane's pilot chose to land in Kazakhstan. On December 29, Aliyev posited the theory that Russian air traffic controllers may have redirected the plane with the expectation that it would fall into the Caspian, in which case “attempts to hush up the issue” would have been “successful.”

Aliyev also said at the time that Azerbaijan would expect Russia to pay compensation to the victims. But in a phone interview on Monday, Joshgun Nesibli, the brother of one of the flight attendants on the plane, said he was interested in something else.

“Why do I need compensation from Russia? I don't need it,” said Nesibli, whose sister, Hokuma Aliyeva, died in the crash. “I need them to apologize to the people, although this will not bring back our sister.”

(Milana Mazaeva, Oleg Matsnev and Nataliya Vasilyeva contributed reporting.)

Damascus Bishop Nalbandian Voices Armenian Concerns during Syrian Transition

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Crackdown on Assad Regime's Supporters

There appear to be at least four general areas of concern for Syrian Armenians. First, the new government says that it wants to obtain reparations and bring to justice those whose hands are bloody from the past regime. Nalbandian said that many members of HTS say that Christians, including Armenians, backed the Assad regime, though the new government officially does not say this. In response, he said, "It is not so that we backed the Assad regime. It was that everyone had to live with the Assad regime. I can speak for myself. I have a school and I have to cooperate with the Ministry of Education. I have houses, apartments and other properties. I have to work with the mayor and the city of Damascus. We have also a spiritual court so I have to work with the Ministry of Justice."

In other words, for most people to conduct their daily lives and survive, they had to deal with the government but that did not imply backing the regime. For example, Armenians worked in the city, in social services or the infrastructure system, he said, like others.

Moreover, he said that when something happened to Armenian community members during that period, he and others who were in a position to intervene and ask for justice had to struggle for this purpose.

Strong Turkish Influence

Armenians are made uneasy by the Turkish connection to HTS. Nalbandian gave three examples from the past as background which bear this out. First, when opposition terrorist groups attacked Aleppo during the earlier civil war, the damage to Christian and Armenian districts and streets evidenced the intention of the larger regional player, Turkey. Second, when Kessab, the Armenian village in northwestern Syria, was occupied in 2014, the al-Nusra terrorists invaded it from the nearby Turkish border. He said, "You can now count one plus one is two to understand this."

The third example is the destruction of



Bishop Armash Nalbandian with UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, during a December 18, 2024 meeting in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Damascus, during the latter's meeting with Syrian clergy leaders, including Armenian Prelacy of Aleppo Primate Archbishop Magar Ashkarian (photo courtesy Bishop Armash Nalbandian Facebook page)



The representative of the Governor of Damascus Maher Marwan congratulates Bishop Armash Nalbandian at the Armenian Diocese on the occasion of Christmas (photo courtesy Bishop Armash Nalbandian Facebook page)

the Armenian Genocide Martyrs Memorial Church in Der Zor in 2015 by fighters of the Islamic State. Nalbandian noted: "The location of this chapel is not important for the military, strategically. It is just in the street, and there is not a huge meaning just to occupy this place. When they came and bombed and desecrated this monument, we can read what is behind it. In my humble opinion, I can say that...they tried to hurt our feelings and our soul as Armenians here, because the Armenians in Syria are mainly survivors of the genocide of the second, third, and fourth generations."

Turning to recent events, Nalbandian said that it is telling that the first foreign embassy that opened in Damascus was the Turkish one. On December 12, only a few days after the collapse of the Assad regime, the chief of the Turkish Intelligence Service (Milli Istihbarat Teşkilat), İbrahim Kalın, came to meet with the new leaders of the government and prayed in the famous Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. A bit later, on December 22, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's visit to Damascus with a heartfelt welcome from al-Sharaa. These are all indicators of Turkish influence and importance for the new regime.

Additionally, in the first few days after the collapse of the Assad regime in Aleppo, you could buy anything in Syrian lira, US dollars or Turkish lira. Nalbandian said that while Syrian lira is the official currency of the country, and the use of dollars as a globally accepted currency is understandable, the use of Turkish currency shows the economic and political importance of Turkey in the area.

Post Revolution Era

There is still a great deal of disorganization in Syria in this transitional period. During the earlier civil war period, Nalbandian related that the Assad government gave weapons to young men as part of a sanctioned defense effort to control who entered the Armenian and Christian districts and defend the houses and properties of Armenians and Christians there. Such defense forces, which were not organized specifically as Armenian or Christian but on a district basis, do not exist anymore, he said.

However, Nalbandian pointed out that

after the collapse of the Assad regime, police do not exist in parts of Syria and there is no official army presence. He said, "This new government is facing huge problems to organize infrastructure services to keep the cities secure and stable." He said that where some kind of policemen are present, the local population offered to help them to keep order in these districts. Armenians too



Bishop Armash Nalbandian blessing the pomegranates at St. Sarkis Church, Damascus, January 1, 2024 (photo courtesy Bishop Armash Nalbandian Facebook page)

continue to patrol in some densely Armenian-populated areas.

"We had this experience, but I don't think this will last long. After this new government establishes services of order, they will seize all weapons from the people," Nalbandian declared.

In general, Nalbandian said, "Life is moving towards normalization. Schools restarted working by December 15 or 16, after some 10 days of closure. Now there is vacation until after Christmas on January 7. Everyone started going to their places of work. But when dark falls, people prefer not to go out and stay home. It is nothing dangerous, but we have to be very cautious."

In the big cities, things appear fairly calm but in many other places, Nalbandian said that thieves were profiting from the unstable situation. Also, some people use the opportunity to take revenge or settle accounts with people they had issues with.

There also have been some incidents specifically targeting Christians, including

Armenians. For example, he said that in the central city of Hama, 14-15-year-old teenagers shot the wall of the Greek Orthodox Church. Everyone has a Kalashnikov or some kind of weapon at present, Nalbandian noted. The teenagers also entered the Christian cemetery and damaged a few tombstones. However, a local pastor or people called the police, who came and captured the perpetrators, who apologized.

Similarly, when a Christmas tree was set on fire in al-Suqaylabiyah, near Hama, the police captured the young people who did it in a few hours and promised to restore the tree.

Nalbandian said, "I am not afraid of the thieves and the burning of the Christmas tree. I think that it is normal in this unstable situation. Robberies and casualties also happen everywhere in the world. I would be

afraid, however, if the police would not be able to control it and restore order and security to the region."

In the meanwhile, he said that Armenian community leaders and others are asking the authorities to take action to minimize these incidents.

Theocracy or Democracy?

Perhaps the most troubling uncertainty is whether the new Syrian state will be a democracy or be ruled through Islamic law as a theocracy, in which Christians would be second-class citizens. HTS started out as a promoter of the latter. It was formerly known as al-Nusra Front after working with the Islamic State (ISIS) around 2011-12, became affiliated with al-Qaeda. It started out as a jihadist offshoot of the Islamic State (ISIS) around 2011-12, became affiliated with al-Qaeda the following year, but by 2016 split from it. In 2017 through the merger of several armed factions HTS was formed, and it came to control Idlib

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INTERNATIONAL

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Province, in northwestern Syria, where it created the Syrian Salvation Government.

HTS was designated as a terrorist organization by the UN, the US, the EU and the UK. In fact, in 2017 the US State Department offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to the capture of its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani). This offer was only rescinded in December 2024 and HTS is trying to portray itself as more moderate. It has disavowed international terrorism.

How Syria will be governed after the current transitional regime ends on March 1 is still to be determined. Nalbandian said, "We are very worried. We are very concerned about the situation because we don't know what is happening and we don't know what will happen. Even this new government doesn't know how it will rule all Syria as a government and in which direction it will have to go. We Christians, but also Armenians, are just following day by day or even hour by hour because changes are happening so quickly."

One problem is the lack of verifiable official statements of the position of the government. Nalbandian said, "We don't have any official portal so that we can say this is the official announcement of the government. Everything we hear, the information that we get, is on a Facebook basis. And you know that Facebook is 100 percent true, and 100 percent not true. I will not say 50-50 to just not give the credit to Facebook."

While Nalbandian said that the background of the people coming into power is well known, they have made promises for democracy. At the same time, many representatives from the US, Europe and elsewhere are coming to meet with them and they stress the principle of preserving the rights of the religious and ethnic minorities. Many of the Christian clerics, including Bishop Nalbandian, are giving interviews to foreign media and underlining the importance of the latter. "With the pressure of the international community," he said, "we have a huge hope that this government will consider when it is going to write the new constitution to include these rights in it."

Meeting with the New Leaders

On December 11, 2024, a meeting of 40 Christian clerical leaders of Damascus, including Bishop Armash Nalbandian, with Bashir Ali, director of the new government's Department for Religious Communities, took place at the latter's request at the Latin Church of Damascus to discuss issues concerning these communities. Nalbandian said, "We talked with him and stated all our concerns and demands. It was before Christmas, so [we asked] how Christmas will be? Will it be safe? Will the government be able to have everything under control. Will our lives be safe?"

The answer was that everything will be good and safe, and a new Syria was being created. Nalbandian said, "We got very huge and beautiful promises. At the end we said this is okay, but now we need time to see all these promises happening in reality."

The church leaders of Damascus, at a regular meeting hosted by the Armenian Diocese of Damascus at St. Sarkis Church on December 12, 2024, decided to create a body to maintain ongoing communications with the new government of Syria and its various bodies, and to present the concerns, demands and rights of the Christian communities and churches of Syria.

Several weeks later, the main leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa, invited a delegation from the heads of the Christian churches in Syria to meet with him at the presidential palace. This December 31, 2024, meeting only lasted around half an hour or



Bishop Armash Nalbandian and other Syrian Christian clerical leaders with Ahmad al-Sharaa, center, at the Syrian Presidential Palace, on December 31, 2024 (photo courtesy Bishop Armash Nalbandian Facebook page)

less, Nalbandian said. The Christian clerics reiterated their concerns and underlined the importance of the rewriting of the constitution. They said they wish to be very active and involved in this process in order not only to defend their own rights but those of every citizen of Syria.

Nalbandian said that they also declared that they didn't consider themselves minorities because Christians were in Syria before Islam. As an important component of Syrian society, they have to be present both in the writing of the constitution but also in the government building, perhaps with one or two seats in the cabinet, as ministers.

They also asked about rumors of an upcoming national dialogue conference, and whether if it takes place, the clerical representatives will also be invited. They asked what role or position they would have in such a discussion or negotiation. Al-Sharaa replied that he came to Damascus and now everyone is free and no longer under pressure as during the Assad regime.

Al-Sharaa said that they don't consider anyone minorities, and everyone was equal, so that they want the law to endow everyone with the same rights. He mentioned that out of 20 of his friends, 10 are Christians, including Armenians. Nalbandian said "He was just giving us the feeling that he is for this mosaic picture of Syria. But about our presence and this conference of national dialogue, he said nothing and then finished the meeting."

At the end they took pictures and wished everyone a happy new year and that was that, said Nalbandian.

Nalbandian concluded, "I will not speak on behalf of anyone, but I feel that there will be some Islamic coloring in all this, and maybe also Islamistic (meaning extremist) coloring. Islamic is okay. We will accept this because the majority are Muslims, but Islamistic means more extremism."

Aid for Syrian Armenians

The Armenian community's religious leadership is active on two levels, Nalbandian said: "The first is to be in touch with these new rulers, to follow [developments], and if we see something, raise our voice that it is not right... On the other hand, we are working with our members, and families, offering them humanitarian aid. We are giving food baskets or money for them to survive until we see what will happen."

There are two dioceses of the Armenian Church in Syria. The Diocese of Damascus includes as part of its jurisdiction the cities of Homs, Hama, and the southern part of

the country, and is under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of All Armenians, headquartered in Echmiadzin, Armenia. The Prelacy of Aleppo, unlike that of Damascus, is under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, headquartered in Antelias, Lebanon. It includes in addition to Aleppo, the coastal areas such as Latakia, Kessab, and the Jazira region, with Der Zor, Qamashli and Hasaka.

Despite these different jurisdictions, during the Syrian civil war, an emergency Armenian relief organization (Suriyahayutean Shdab Oknutean yev Verakanknumi Marmin) was created to unite aid efforts for Syrian Armenians in all areas. There was also a sister organization created in Los Angeles, the Syrian Armenian Relief Fund (SARF), but after the end of that war,

helping people to survive on a monthly basis until the situation becomes clearer in a few months. The Aleppo prelicity is helping its population in the same way.

Nalbandian said that there is some financial support for his diocese from Echmiadzin and some Syrian Armenians from Damascus who now are working abroad make some modest donations. Moreover, he has asked sister Armenian dioceses in the US, Europe and elsewhere to raise money if they can.

If Armenians in the US wish to help, Bishop Nalbandian said that donations can be made through Armenian diocesan or prelicity headquarters. As Syrian banks have no links to international banks, direct transfer is not possible. The Eastern or Western Diocese in the US can transfer



A regular meeting of church heads of Damascus hosted by the Armenian Diocese of Damascus at St. Sarkis Church, Damascus, on December 12, 2024, at which it was decided to create a body to maintain ongoing communications with the new government of Syria and its various bodies and to present the concerns, demands and rights of the Christian communities and churches of Syria (photo courtesy Bishop Armash Nalbandian Facebook page)

sometime in 2018 or 2019, both organizations ended their services.

With the new challenges facing Syrian Armenians, while many have begun to go to their shops and workplaces, there is no business or real work. Therefore Bishop Nalbandian said that each diocese began to help its population from its own resources. For example, a week ago he said the diocese helped 200 families in Damascus with money, and then 100 families in Homs. It is

money to Echmiadzin and from there, this money will be brought as cash to Damascus. Money could also be directly transferred to Echmiadzin bank accounts.

Nalbandian noted that the Tekeyan Cultural Association chapter in Damascus is very active and organizes lectures, discussions, gatherings, musical events, Christmas bazaars and other activities. Its members serve on the Diocesan Council and are involved in the work of the diocese.

Community News

Awaiting Sentencing, Menendez Pleads for Leniency and Blames His Wife

By Tracey Tully

NEW YORK (*New York Times*) — With less than a month to go before Robert Menendez, New Jersey's disgraced former U.S. senator, is scheduled to be sentenced for corruption, his lawyers submitted an emotion-laden appeal for leniency based on what they depicted as Menendez's hardscrabble upbringing, life of service and devotion to family.

In a legal brief filed minutes before midnight on Thursday, January 2, the lawyers, Avi Weitzman and Adam Fee, laid out Menendez's rise to political prominence in Hudson County, N.J., and a catalog of good deeds done for constituents during three decades in Congress.

As they did during Menendez's two-month bribery trial in Manhattan, Weitzman and Fee suggested that their client's greatest failing was being led astray by a conniving wife.

Nadine Menendez, the former senator's wife, was charged with her husband with conspiring to trade his political influence for bribes of cash, gold bars and a Mercedes-Benz convertible. Her trial is expected to start next month.

"The evidence showed that Senator Menendez was unaware of activities that Nadine was undertaking, including the receipt and sale of gold bars by Nadine, and cash she stored in her locked closet and her safe deposit box," the lawyers wrote in their filing.

And in a letter of support also filed on January 2, Menendez's daughter, Alicia Menendez, a high-profile anchor on the cable news network MSNBC, hinted at the sacrifices her father continued to make for his wife, who was being treated for breast cancer.

"During the darkest days of his own life, he has navigated his wife's breast cancer diagnosis with a type of grace and forgiveness I honestly do not understand but admire," Alicia Menendez wrote.

Her letter is among more than 120 filed on behalf of Menendez, part of an attempt to justify a prison term far shorter than the 12 years recommended by the court's probation department. The U.S. attorney's office for the Southern District of New York, which prosecuted Menendez, is expected to disclose the government's sentencing recommendation in the coming weeks.

A spokesman for the Southern District declined to comment on the filing, as did Alicia Menendez's lawyer, Barry Coburn.

Menendez and two New Jersey businessmen, Fred Daibes and Wael Hana, were convicted in July of being at the center of a vast international bribery conspiracy. A onetime powerful Democrat who led the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Menendez was found guilty of each of the 16 counts he faced, including acting as an agent of a foreign government.

Menendez, 71, has maintained his innocence and plans to appeal the jury verdict.

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Genocide Education Project workshops

GenEd Teaches Teachers About Armenian Genocide

By Araz Havan

Special to the *Mirror-Spectator*

BOSTON — For most Armenian Americans, it is important that public schools in their cities or towns teach the Armenian Genocide.

In Massachusetts, even though there is a state-wide mandate requiring the teaching of the Genocide as well as the Holocaust, instruction can vary depending on the municipality. A district might want to go beyond the basic curriculum materials — and currently there is a grant program for this — in order to bring “high-quality genocide education...meaningful learning experiences...and lead to long-term impact,” according to the Massachusetts Department of Education.

The grant can help with funding teacher development, purchasing or building curriculum, or relevant enrichment activities such as field trips, guest speakers, or other cultural events. Many districts who receive the grant reach out to the Genocide Education Project (GenEd).

Initially started in California in the early 2000's, GenEd first began working with the San Francisco Unified School District as part of an initiative to bring Armenian Genocide education into the curriculum. Since then, the organization works to provide robust and meaningful teaching materials to school districts across the country.

With a focus on the Armenian Genocide, GenEd aims to show teachers how to incorporate the topics of genocide and human rights into the classroom. According to the organization's website, the idea for its founding came from the absence of scholastic instruction about the Armenian Genocide by the Turkish government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915.

California and Massachusetts are a part of only 11 states that mandate some level of genocide education; GenEd hopes to reach more. However, that can be logistically difficult. The Teacher Fellowship Program in Armenia is one way that GenEd can address this issue. The fellowship provides professional development for middle and high school level educators through a trip to Armenia, where the teachers attend workshops and visit content-related sites.

A requirement for the Teaching Fellowship is that upon their return, “the Fellow has to produce a workshop that affects at least twenty teachers and a commitment to teaching about the Armenian Genocide,” said Seda Aghamianz, who serves as GenEd Administrator.

“We can't be everywhere. Our job is to train teachers how to teach their kids. We get one teacher, that teacher in one year can teach up to a hundred kids. That's just the first year,” said Aghamianz, on GenEd's strategy to branch out.

GenEd this year hosted multiple workshops during the annual conferences for the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in Boston.

A full-day workshop, “Understanding the Armenian Genocide through Primary Sources and Memoirs,” offered resources and materials to help students learn about the impact of genocide throughout history. GenEd's Teacher Fellows also see GENED, page 9



Genocide Education Project workshops

Human Rights Defender Garo Paylan to Speak at Harvard University on January 22

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Internationally recognized political and human rights leader Garo Paylan will be delivering the Annual Hrant Dink Memorial Lecture at Harvard University on Wednesday, January 22.

The Boston based Friends of Hrant Dink, Inc., welcomes Paylan as the 2025 Distinguished Lecturer, following a long series of annual lecture events that are sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University (Hrant Dink Memorial CMES Fund).

Paylan is a leading opposition voice and a prominent human rights defender in Turkey. He served in the Turkish Parliament for eight years, from 2015 to June 2023, and is internationally recognized for his dedication to democracy and the rights of all minorities in Turkey, as well as his advocacy for peace in the South Caucasus.

Paylan was one of the very few Armenians ever elected to the Turkish Parliament and the first lawmaker to propose an amendment for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey. Throughout his tenure, he consistently emphasized the need for Turkey to confront this historic tragedy, despite facing legal prosecution for his proposals and statements.

Widely regarded as one of Turkey's foremost advocates for democracy, Paylan has received several international awards for his work in promoting democratic values.

His lecture, titled “Building Bridges of Understanding: Hrant Dink's Legacy in a Fractured World,” will focus on the many dimensions of the legacy of the assassinated journalist, Hrant Dink.

Gonca Sönmez-Poole, the newly elected chairwoman of the Friends of Hrant Dink, Inc, stated, “Hrant Dink's legacy stretches beyond the borders of Turkey and into our wider world where the need for democracy, transparency and social justice is being obstructed by authoritarian tendencies. His legacy has proven essential not only for Turkey, but also for the understanding of the principles of freedom of speech and expression in every corner of our world.”

Harry Parsekian, founder and Board member of Friends of Hrant Dink, Inc, shared his thought about this upcoming event: “We could not have invited a more qualified person to speak about Hrant Dink's legacy than Garo Paylan.”

Paylan is currently a visiting scholar with the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C., where his research focuses on the South Caucasus and Turkey.

The lecture, open to the public, will begin at 4:30 p.m., Wednesday, January 22, in the Science Center Hall E, 1 Oxford St, Cambridge, MA 02138. See: <https://cmes.fas.harvard.edu/event/building-bridges-understanding-hrant-dink's-legacy-fractured-world>.



COMMUNITY NEWS

Gary R. Phillips Elected President of the Armenian Missionary Association of America

PARAMUS, N.J. — On December 7, the Board of Directors of the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA) elected Gary R. Phillips as its new President.

Phillips was born and raised in Los Angeles. He graduated from the University of Southern California (USC), earning a Bachelor of Science degree in 1980, followed by a Juris Doctor degree in 1985. He worked for Deloitte before becoming a Certified Public Accountant in 1987. He also earned a Real Estate Broker's License in 1991. Professionally, Phillips is a partner of Phillips Law Partners, LLP, where he specializes in estate planning, trusts and estates, real estate, business law, and non-profit organizations. He is widely recognized as a trusted advisor to individuals and organizations for his leadership in these areas.

Phillips has long been involved in both his local church and the broader Armenian community. He has served twice as Moderator of the United Armenian Congregational Church (UACC) in Los Angeles and held various leadership roles, including Chair of the Board of Trustees and the Board of Christian Education. His commitment to AMAA's mission has taken him to Armenia multiple times

as part of AMAA Board delegations, where he has witnessed and supported the organization's impactful work.

In addition to his work with AMAA, Mr. Phillips serves as a member of the Board of Trustees for Haigazian University, has served on the Board of Directors of the C&E Merdinian Armenian Evangelical School, and has held leadership roles in other Christian private charitable foundations. His extensive experience in law, finance, and community service brings a wealth of expertise and dedication to his new role as AMAA President.

Phillips resides in Los Angeles with his wife, Arsine Bedrossian Phillips. Together, they have three adult children: Christina, Ashley, and Richard. His unwavering commitment to faith, family, and the Armenian community will inspire his vision and leadership as AMAA President.

In addition to Phillips' appointment, AMAA's newly elected officers include: Michael Voskian, D.M.D., Vice President; Nurhan Helvacian, Ph.D., Treasurer; and Mark Kassabian, Esq., and Phyllis Dohanian, Co-Recording Secretaries.



GenEd Teaches Teachers About Armenian Genocide

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presented a variety of topics ranging from "Genocide Education through Literature," to "Armenian Bird Letters: Discovering Our Shared Humanity," during the conference.

Together with GenEd, the Armenian Museum of America (AMA), and the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR), graduates of the Teacher Fellowship were able to showcase their workshops at this year's NCSS and NCTE conferences. Educators from around the country learned how to help students understand the impact that genocide has on survivors and future generations.

Cyndie Larkin, an educator from Lexington High School who attended the "Understanding the Armenian Genocide through Primary Sources and Memoirs" workshop, saw how effective these strategies could be in her own practice.

"I feel like when I have taught [Armenian Genocide] in the past it's tacked on at the end of the WWI as a segue into talking about genocide and the Holocaust. It wasn't sitting right with me," said Larkin. GenEd's workshops helped show "how important it is to weave the story of Armenia into the curriculum."

"The workshop was unbelievable and very informative...I haven't had any dedicated class time in my undergraduate and graduate programs about the Armenian genocide, so I walked away learning more than I had in my six years of formal education," Larkin said. When asked about next steps, Cyndie Larkin said she's looking forward to revamping her World War I curriculum and even applying for a spot in the Teaching Fellowship Program.

Added Larkin, "I want to bring in more modern events to show students what's still happening in Armenia and that everything didn't end with WWI. I want to continue to learn about Armenia and hope that I can someday take the genocide education project's trip to Armenia."

This result is what GenEd is trying to achieve. As the educators attend workshop sessions run by Teacher Fellows, they can take their new knowledge back to their own classrooms, year after year, impacting students like a snowball effect. Through education, GenEd hopes to inform — and ultimately help — future generations fight against and prevent human rights violations and genocide.

For more information, visit <https://genocideeducation.org/>

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Teen Karabakh Blast Victim Heads Toward a Bright Future

ARTSAKH TEEN, from page 1

To this day, there is no official reason for the inferno that engulfed the depot. Some say it was the work of the Azerbaijanis, while others suggest that the fumes from the gas tanker combined with the actions of a careless smoker might have set off the explosion.

Nelson Sargsyan was 17 when he accompanied his father and uncle and cousins there on that fateful September day. The resulting explosion was so forceful that his uncle's body has never been found while he and his father suffered from extensive burns. Nelson, luckily, survived; his father did not.

Over dinner this December, at the home of Stepan and Talin Chiloyan, Sargsyan and his mother, Lylia Mardyan, spoke about what they had gone through as well as the road ahead. In addition to Nelson, she has two daughters, Takouhi and Arous, both younger than Nelson.

Mother and son were in the US for a second stint at the Shriners Children's Hospital in Boston, where Sargsyan is undergoing extensive treatment for his injuries. His first stay at Shriners was January-April 2024. His treatments have resulted in nothing short of a miracle.

It is important to note that not only is the treatment free at the Shriners, but the hospital also offers free housing for families.

From Blockade to Escape

The majority of Karabakh (Artsakh) was invaded and taken over by Azerbaijani forces in 2020. Only Stepanakert and its immediate suburbs were left to be run by the Armenian enclave's leadership. In December 2022, the Azerbaijani Army imposed a blockade on the Lachin Corridor, the enclave's only connection to Armenia and thus the outside world. In November 2023, Azerbaijani forces fully invaded the enclave and forced out every Armenian, under threat of genocide. A handful apparently remain there, either too old or frail to leave.

Nelson's mother, Lylia Mardyan, is a petite, elegant woman with sorrowful eyes. She recounted how as the blockade continued and life became progressively harder, the population did not lose hope.



Nelson Sargsyan with Boston Bruins players including Marc McLaughlin (26), Justin Brazeau (55) at Shriners Hospital in December

would have to leave and that the Armenian republic would cease to exist. The government's messaging was more positive, suggesting that an end to the blockade was near, she said. However, she noted that at one point, the government issued an edict that basements and bomb shelters should be cleaned out and preparations should be made to take shelter in case war broke out.

"One day the government announced that everyone should prepare a small bag with necessities and passports and important documents, because there might be something. The people kind of ignored it and thought the army is fighting and we have [already] suffered for nine months," she recalled, meaning that they expected a

the food burden.

In September, Mardyan recalled, when school was about to start, the parents were frantic because there were no new clothes, but still the kids were sent to school and there was hope for victory. All that changed on September 19, when all of a sudden, there was a loud explosion, and they realized that war had broken out.

"The children were at school and the teachers had led the children to underground shelters," she recalled. She hurried back from her job at a nursing home.

At the time, it was hard to make calls on cell phones as the war had interrupted regular service. Nelson, she said, went to pick up her youngest, Arous and took her to their aunt's house. She picked up her daughter Takouhi and the two also went to her sister's home. They hid in the basement and she remembers being told that the Azeri army was close by and that it was not possible for the Armenian and Artsakh forces to hold them off. They all went to the church basement and awaited the end

of the war.

Newly-installed President Samvel Shahramanyan surrendered and ended the war, she said, because if it continued, the entire population would be wiped out, similar to 1915, she said.

Her husband, Ashot, had been serving in the army in Artsakh for 20 years. He and other relatives were serving in the Martakert region, surrounded by the Azeri army for several days.

A couple of days after their return, they heard that at a certain location in Stepanakert, there was some gas for sale. Everyone was looking for gas to get out.

A group from the family, including Nelson and his father, Ashot, and his uncle, Artur, headed to the depot.

"They had gone there hungry in the morning and we had just baked bread," she recalled. As the hours passed, she said, "We kept calling them but they did not answer."

"The explosion happened," she said, just managing to get the words out. They still did not know.

Finally her sister was able to get in touch with Ashot, who said that he and his son were injured and that his brother-in-law was nowhere to be found.

"We ran there and everyone was calling for their relatives," she said. "People were screaming in the blast zone."

They went to the morgue to check for her brother-in-law but they could not find him. "Until now he has not been found," she said.

Nelson recalled the events of that terrible day. "When the explosion happened, we wanted to walk out of the area. There were many dead people. I saw so many injured people. My dad kept saying leave. I wanted to help but it was very hard," he said. "It was so hard."

In fact, Stepan Chiloyan added something that the humble Nelson had not; he said while Nelson had been burned by the blast, the injuries to his hands were not extensive. However, it was when he tried to help someone up who was fully engulfed in flames, that his hands suffered horrific burns.

Nelson is quick to smile and has a charming personality, though his difficult experiences are never far from his mind. When asked what he would like to do as an adult, he said, "Once my hands get well, I want to become a mechanic," he said.

Asked how he was bearing up with all that he has endured, he choked up and replied, "I have to; I have two sisters and my mother."

continued on next page



From left, Stepan Chiloyan, Nelson Sargsyan, his mother Lylia Mardyan and Talin Chiloyan

Speaking in Armenian, she recalled, "During the blockade it was very difficult. There was no bread, and when there was, there were long lines at bakeries. There was no food nor sweets for children. My sister would help me by sending meat from the village. We felt we were suffering but would emerge victorious after [so much] suffering."

She and the others did not think that they

positive result.

There was little connection with the outside world. Medications had run out so the Red Cross would take the more gravely ill patients to Yerevan. In addition, the Russian forces would sometimes arrive with trucks bearing tea or food. "The lines were very long," she said. To help her, she said, her sister would take Lylia's three children to the village for a couple of months to ease



From left, Lylia Mardyan, Nelson Sargsyan, Very Rev. Hrant Tahanian, John Aftandilian and Stepan Chiloyan at Shriners Hospital in Boston (St. Stephen's Armenian Church photo)



COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page

Medical Treatment

On September 26, Nelson and his father, along with several other burn victims, were transported to Armenia by a Russian military helicopter. The rest of the family followed on September 27.

Ashot Sargsyan was in the hospital in Armenia for nine days and even endured the amputation of his arms but succumbed to his injuries. Nelson left the hospital mid-November. He would still go back regularly to have his bandages changed.

A few days after the arrival of the wounded, she recalled, the hospital authorities allowed parents to visit their children. The sights and sounds from that time still haunt her.

“There were so many boys, calling for their mothers. They were all burned, with the smell of burned flesh in the air,” she said. Almost 20 died in the hospital.

While Nelson suffered extensive burns to his face and body, his hands bore the brunt of the injuries because he was trying to help someone. “When the fire happened, he was trying to get out of the hole. He saw his father, his uncle, his cousins and got excited. He turned around to help others. During that time, someone was burning. He extended his hand to help him. That person’s skin melted on his hands,” Chiloyan said.

Nelson’s suffering did not end with the horrific explosion. As Chiloyan related, after the accident, while he was being treated in Yerevan, the doctors gave him little in way of painkillers despite his tremendous injuries and therefore he did not let them work very much on his hands as the pain was unbearable, and infections had set in.

Nelson said that the doctors told him, “You are a boy. You can take the pain.”

Mardyan said that for the last visit to the Yerevan hospital, her sister, a nurse, insisted on accompanying Nelson. She recalled that her sister told her she had fought with the doctors, telling them that if the treatment continued in the same way, Nelson would lose both hands.

“There is no hot water at the hospital to loosen the scabs to clean them,” Mardyan said. Instead, she was told to wet Nelson’s wounds at home and then bring him to the hospital, in the freezing December cold.

“When I would complain, they would say you don’t understand,” she said.

She added that this was why Nelson was at first reluctant to go to Shriners, worried he would endure the same pain. However, he was happy to be wrong.

Chance Encounter Leads To Shriners

A confluence of events helped bring Nelson for care to Shriners. Stepan Chiloyan had approached the hospital after the explosion to see if more victims from the explosion could be brought to Boston after a couple were brought here in the immediate wake of the accident. The hospital said yes, as long as they met the requirements.

Visiting the hospital one day was Dr. Salpy Akaragian, a Los Angeles-based nurse and founder and director of the Armenian International Medical Fund. Akaragian holds a doctorate in nursing and is director emeritus of UCLA Health’s International Nursing Program and Nurse credentialing. Her NGO focuses on providing cochlear implants in Armenia.

Lylia said that Akaragian saw that Nelson’s hands in particular were severely burned and asked if he would be willing to come to the US for medical care.

Chiloyan then approached Akaragian after he met with Nelson and suggested that he be brought to Shriners. Akaragian agreed and handled the paperwork and Chiloyan arranged the tickets.

Added Chiloyan, “They arrived here on January 5, 2023. I picked them up from the airport and went straight to the hospital. Two days later they worked on his hands.”

“The skin on his hands was black,” Lylia said. Since then, between surgeries and medication, Mardyan said, Nelson has improved tremendously. Both his hands and his face have undergone tremendous improvement. Not only has normal color been restored to the skin of his hands, but the treatments and operations have given him full use of his hands.

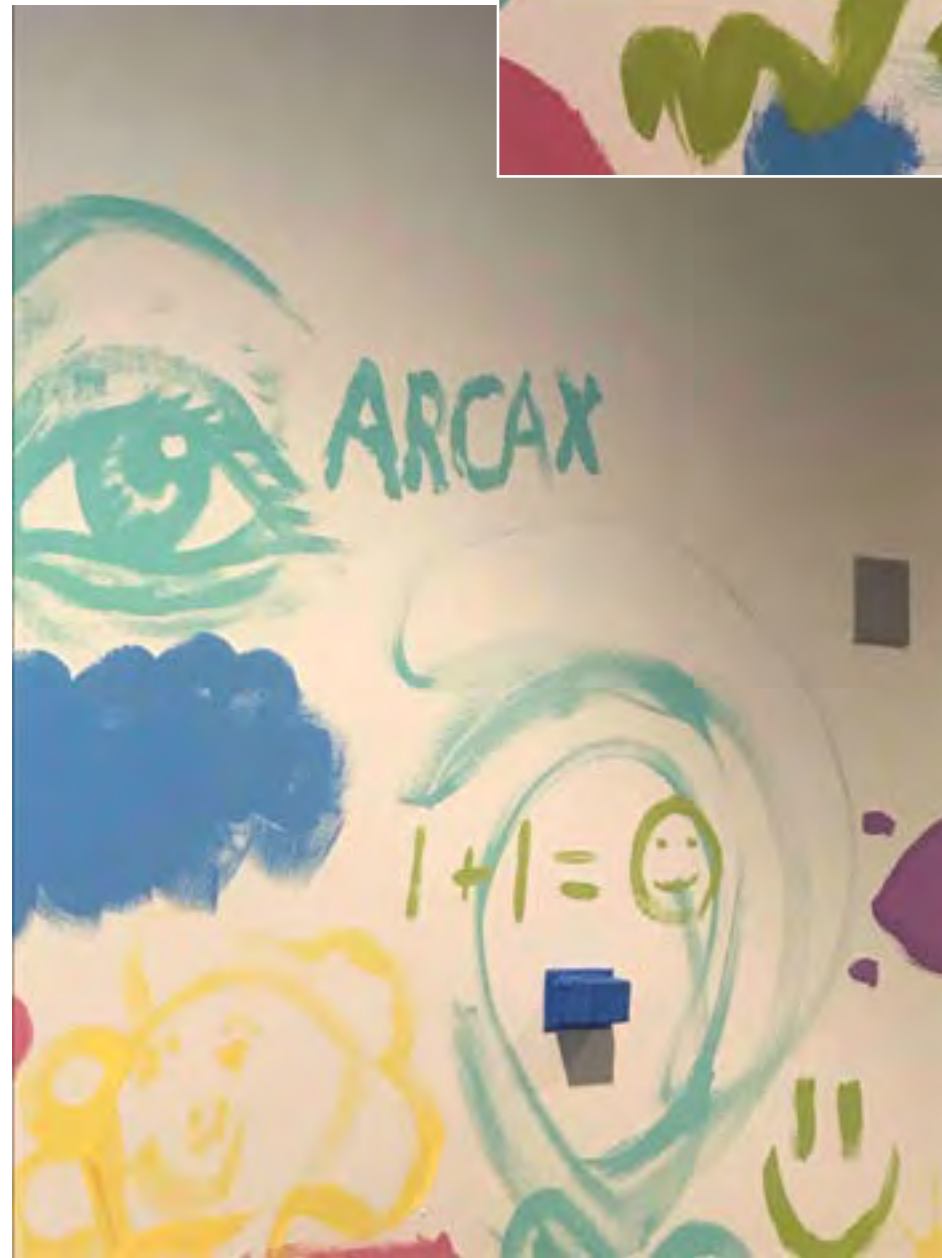
“Until I came the first time, I couldn’t do anything on my own — eat, or get dress or bathe. Now it’s much better,” Nelson said.

Lylia praised Chiloyan for being there for them through all the surgeries.

The first step at Shriners was a meeting with Dr. Robert Sheridan, director of the hospital’s burn service, to assess his needs.

“The first meeting was really hard for Nelson and us, to see his pain. Once they undid the bandages, the wounds and the tissue were infected. They hadn’t cleaned the wounds well,” Chiloyan said.

Someone who eased his pain — literally — was Dr. Gennadiy Fuzaylov, an anesthesiologist at Shriners, who for the first time was able to calm Nelson and treat him. Chiloyan said that the doctor was extremely kind, sitting with Nelson to make sure he was reacting well to the anesthesia. Plastic



surgeon Dr. Daniel N. Driscoll at Shriners has also worked on Sargsyan, who qualifies for free care at Shriners until he is 21.

The wounded young people from Artsakh who previously received treatment at Shriners are Henrik Azroumalyan, 14 and Arman Asryan, 16. Again, Chiloyan and friends stepped up to raise money for their care.

Chiloyan said the main impetus for the young people to come here was the local Armenian American Medical Association, and its former president, Dr. Rosalynn Nazarian. The group is now led by Dr. Hovig Chitilian.

Another member of the organization, Dr.



The hospital allowed patients and families to paint something special to them on a wall in their wing. Nelson and his mother chose to write “Artsakh” and paint the famous Mamik-Papik sculpture.

their life in Yerevan. The family members are still not citizens of Armenia. They get 50,000 drams a month from the government, but the payments don’t come when they are out of the country.

Lylia and her three children live with her sister and her children, making for a total of seven in a one-bedroom apartment.

“Difficulties are a part of life,” Chiloyan said, “But you need to be positive. Life goes on.”

Mardyan added that having kind people help them has this intolerable situation bearable.

As for their future, it is still up in the air. Asked if they planned to stay in Armenia, Mardyan responded, “We want to go back to Artsakh. But Armenia, I am not sure. It is very difficult for us. We can’t get jobs as Artsakh citizens. They say you have to be a citizen. If you are a citizen the children have to serve in the army. The pay is low and rents are high.”

In addition, Mardyan said that there is some lingering resentment by Armenians about the loss of their sons in the war.

She added that renting a place is very hard. When she called around to rent a place for her and her three children, she was often told that without a man in the household, there would be a question of how they would make ends meet.

“They said they could not rent us the place,” she said. “I told them we get money from the government but they still hung up on me.”

The family needs financial help for their day-to-day lives. Fundraising has been done at St. Stephen’s Armenian Church, as well as St. James Armenian Church.

In addition, Stepan Chiloyan has started a Go Fund Me page for the family. To donate, visit <https://gofund.me/34f535b9>.

Shant Parseghian, helped Mardyan get her diabetes in check, Mardyan said.

Before leaving, Nelson met with a surgeon to see if his tendons could be strengthened in his hands. Plans for the next visit include work on his hands and laser on his face.

While here, Chiloyan and his son, Sipan, took Nelson to an NBA game and they have taken him to his favorite place to eat, Shake Shack.

Life in Armenia

Mother and son returned to Armenia on December 15.

During the interview they spoke about



COMMUNITY NEWS

Awaiting Sentencing, Menendez Pleads For Leniency and Blames His Wife

MENENDEZ, from page 8

But the federal judge handling the case, Sidney H. Stein, has denied Menendez's request to delay his January 29 sentencing until after his wife's trial.

In Thursday's filing, the former senator's lawyers argued that the probation department's recommendation of a 12-year prison term was "draconian — likely a life and death sentence for someone of Bob's age and condition."

Weitzman and Fee suggested that the guidelines instead merited a sentence of no more than 27 months — and even that, they wrote, was too long.

They urged Judge Stein to consider a period of imprisonment of less than 27 months paired with "at least two years' rigorous community service."

"He is certain never to commit future offenses," the lawyers wrote about Menendez. "And his current state — stripped of office and living under a permanent shadow of disgrace and mockery — are more than sufficient to reflect the seriousness of the offenses and to promote respect for the law."

The letters of support came from former constituents, friends, family members and a small handful of elected community leaders in New Jersey.

Menendez's son, Rep. Robert Menendez, said that he hoped his father would have an opportunity to be a presence in his grandchildren's lives, offsetting the decades of "precious moments that he missed" away from his own young family while serving in Congress.

Hector C. Lora, the mayor of Passaic, N.J., described Menendez as "a man who remembers where he came from and who carries a deep-rooted sense of responsibility toward those less fortunate."

nate."

Danny O'Brien, a former chief of staff for Menendez, commended the former senator's willingness to meet with students and to encourage them to "consider public service as a way of fighting for change and giving back."

"I never observed any of the things like those charged in this matter," wrote O'Brien, who worked closely with Menendez in Washington for at least six years. "What Bob Menendez did show me was an abiding love of country and humanity."

The former senator's lawyers argued that his exceedingly public fall from grace was in part punishment enough, and that it had rendered him a "national punchline" and left him in financial ruin.

"Of the countless minor indignities he now faces, his name has been stripped from an elementary school in New Jersey," they wrote. "His once broad circle of friends and political allies have largely disappeared."

The filing also included a statistical analysis of other recent sentences for public corruption and concluded that there was "no reason whatsoever to presume that the guidelines provide useful guidance in bribery cases."

The filing cited the sentences of a half-dozen convicted fallen former New York political luminaries like Dean Skelos, a former leader of the State Legislature.

A review of these cases, Menendez's lawyers wrote, suggests that a sentence of just half of what has been proposed "would be one of the harshest ever imposed."

(Benjamin Weiser contributed reporting.)

OBITUARY

Maro (Kalemderian) Meguerditchian

Kessab-Born, Dedicated to Music

LEXINGTON, Mass. — Maro (Kalemderian) Meguerditchian of Lexington passed away peacefully with her family by her side, on December 31, 2024 at age 88.

Maro was born on May 22, 1936 in Latakia, Syria and was raised in Kessab. She was the younger sister of the late Sona Manjikian and daughter of Sara and Hagop Kalemderian. Maro loved to sing and her craft was discovered by the local priest, which ultimately resulted in a scholarship to broaden her studies at the Nishan Palandjian Djemaran (College) in Beirut, Lebanon.

Maro was 14 when she moved to Beirut. Maro's scholarship allowed her to take singing and piano lessons, as well as to sing in the choir at Djemaran. Her time in Beirut fostered her love for education and academia as she studied under the famous Armenian novelist, Levon Shant, and renowned Armenian composer, Parsegh Ganatchian. In 1959 Maro, her sister, and their mother were forced to leave Beirut due to civil uprisings. Upon arriving in the US, her foundational thirst for knowledge carried over into the "New World" where she continued to take music lessons through Boston Conservatory and was celebrated for her impeccable technique as a coloratura soprano. In fact, she never stopped singing.

In 1960, Maro was courted by Dikran Meguerditchian and the two were married. The couple raised their family in Arlington. Dikran ran a camera and photography business, while Maro supported Dikran's work ethic for over 60 years. In addition to raising her family, Maro was active in the local Armenian community. She sang in

Rouben Gregorian's Komitas Choral Society and was a member of the Armenian Relief Society. As her children came of school age, Maro shared her musical talent and became the first music teacher at the newly established St. Stephen's Saturday School. For nearly 12 years, "Digeen Maro" taught Armenian songs to a generation of young students who would continue to call her "Digeen Maro" out of love and respect for what she imparted in them.

Dikran and Maro were quiet and staunch supporters of the Armenian community and built their family around it. Privately, Maro loved traveling and going on cruises with her husband, spending time with friends, and vacationing in Florida with her family.

Maro was the cherished mother of Armen and his wife Sylvie, and Arpi and her husband Rafi Kouyoumdjian. She was also beloved by her grandchildren Araz and Sevan Kouyoumdjian, and Garen and Sarine

Meguerditchian. Maro was predeceased by her husband Dikran and sister Sona Manjikian. She is survived by many nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great-nephews.

She instilled her love for music and Armenian culture to her children and grandchildren, ensuring that they would always have a song in their heart.

Funeral services were held at the St. Stephen's Armenian Church, Watertown, on Friday, January 3. Interment followed at Wildwood Cemetery in Winchester.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church, or the St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School.



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COMMUNITY NEWS

MIT Affiliates Awarded 2024 National Medals of Science, Technology

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Four MIT faculty members are among 23 world-class researchers who have been awarded the nation's highest honors for scientists and innovators, the White House this week.

Angela Belcher and Emery Brown were each presented with the National Medal of Science at a White House ceremony this afternoon, and Paula Hammond '84, PhD '93, and Feng Zhang were awarded the National Medal of Technology and Innovation.

Belcher, the James Mason Crafts Professor of Biological Engineering and Materials Science and Engineering and a member of the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research, was honored for her work designing novel materials for applications that include solar cells, batteries, and medical imaging.

Brown, the Edward Hood Taplin Professor of Medical Engineering and Computational Neuroscience, was recognized for work that has revealed how anesthesia affects the brain. Brown is also a member of MIT's Picower Institute for Learning and Memory and Institute for Medical Engineering and Science (IMES).

Hammond, an MIT Institute Professor, vice provost for faculty, and member of the Koch Institute, was honored for developing methods for assembling thin films that can be used for drug delivery, wound healing, and many other applications.

Zhang, the James and Patricia Poitras Professor of Neuroscience at MIT and a professor of brain and cognitive sciences and biological engineering, was recognized for his work developing molecular tools, including the CRISPR genome-editing system, that have the potential to diagnose and treat disease. Zhang is also an investigator at the McGovern Institute for Brain Research and a core member of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard.

Two additional MIT alumni also accepted awards: Richard Lawrence Edwards '76, a graduate of the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences and of the Department of Architecture, who is now a professor at the University of Minnesota, received a National Medal of Science for his work in geochemistry. And Noubar Afeyan PhD '87, a graduate of the Department of Chemical Engineering and current member of the MIT Corporation, accepted one of two National Medals of Technology and Innovation awarded to an organization. These awards went to the biotechnology companies Moderna, which Afeyan co-founded along with Institute Prof. Robert Langer, and



MIT represent: Arati Prabhakar (left), head of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, presented National Medals to (left to right) Professor Angela Belcher, Institute Professor Paula Hammond, MIT Corporation member Noubar Afeyan PhD '87 on behalf of Moderna, Professor Feng Zhang, and Professor Emery Brown. Not pictured: Richard Lawrence Edwards '76. (Photo courtesy of Angie Belcher.)

Pfizer, for their development of vaccines for Covid-19.

This year, the White House awarded the National Medal of Science to 14 recipients and named nine individual awardees of the National Medal of Technology and Innovation, along with two organizations. To date, nearly 100 MIT affiliates have won one of these two honors.

"Emery Brown is at the forefront of the Institute's collaborations among neuroscience, medicine, and patient care. His research has shifted the paradigm for brain monitoring during general anesthesia for surgery. His pioneering approach based on neural oscillations, as opposed to solely monitoring vital signs, promises to revolutionize how anesthesia medications are delivered to patients," says Nergis Mavalvala, dean of MIT's School of Science. "Feng Zhang is one of the preeminent researchers in CRISPR technologies that have accelerated the pace of science and engineering, blending entrepre-

neurship and scientific discovery. These new molecular technologies can modify the cell's genetic information, engineer vehicles to deliver these tools into the correct cells, and scale to restore organ function. Zhang will apply these life-altering innovations to diseases such as neurodegeneration, immune disorders, and aging."

Hammond and Belcher are frequent collaborators, and each of them has had significant impact on the fields of nanotechnology and nanomedicine.

"Angela Belcher and Paula Hammond have made tremendous contributions to science and engineering, and I'm thrilled for each of them to receive this well-deserved recognition," says Anantha Chandrakasan, dean of the School of Engineering and chief innovation and strategy officer at MIT. "By harnessing the processes of nature, Angela's innovations have impacted fields from energy to the environment to medicine. Her non-invasive imaging system has improved

outcomes for patients diagnosed with many types of cancer. Paula's pioneering research in nanotechnology helped transform the ways in which we deliver and administer drugs within the body — through her technique, therapeutics can be customized and sent directly to specifically targeted cells, including cancer cells."

The National Medal of Science was established in 1959 and is administered for the White House by the National Science Foundation. The medal recognizes individuals who have made outstanding contributions to science and engineering.

The National Medal of Technology and Innovation was established in 1980 and is administered for the White House by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Patent and Trademark Office. The award recognizes those who have made lasting contributions to America's competitiveness and quality of life and helped strengthen the nation's technological workforce.

Lessersohn Appointed Ordjanian Visiting Professor at Columbia for Spring 2025

NEW YORK — Dr. Nora Lessersohn has been appointed the Nikit and Eleanora Ordjanian Visiting Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS) at Columbia University for the Spring of 2025. She will be teaching a course titled "Leaving the Ottoman Empire."

The course will examine the experience of Ottoman American communities before, during, and after their migration to the United States, with a particular focus on Ottoman Armenians pre- and post-genocide. Through close readings of the scholarship on Ottoman Armenian, Turkish, Jewish, Arab, and Greek immigration, students will ask: what global forces compelled Ottoman journeys to America (e.g. economic opportunity, Christian imperialism, state-sponsored violence, interethnic strife)? And what ideologies informed the way these migrants were received in a new country (e.g. nativism, nationalism, Orientalism, philhellenism)? In answering



Dr. Nora Lessersohn

these questions and raising new ones, students will also aim to understand how Ottoman American immigration stories both fit into and challenge the existing scholarship on "American immigration" as well as race, whiteness, and citizenship studies. Throughout the course, special attention

will be paid to the experience of Ottoman American immigrants in New York City through field trips, museums, and other primary and secondary source materials.

This seminar style course (MDES GU4952) is open to auditors as well as matriculating students. Registration for auditors begins January 13 and runs until January 17. Classes begin on January 21. The tuition for Auditors is \$2,400 and for Lifelong Learners (people aged 65 and over) is \$750. Registration for Auditors may be done online at <http://sps.columbia.edu/auditing> and for Lifelong Learners at <http://sps.columbia.edu/auditing/lifelong-learners-auditing-program>.

Lessersohn is a historian of US, Ottoman, and Armenian history. She earned her PhD in history from University College London in 2023, supported by a Calouste Gulbenkian Armenian Studies Scholarship. In 2021-22, she was a Predoctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Museum of American

History. She earned her AB in the study of religion at Harvard College and her AM in Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, where she was also a Visiting Fellow in 2023-2024. Lessersohn has published articles on the memoir of her great-grandfather, Hovhannes Cherishian, and is now preparing a manuscript on Chistopher Oscanyan and Ottoman-American cultural diplomacy across the 19th century (and especially in Civil War era New York City).

The Ordjanian Visiting Professorship program at Columbia is made possible by an endowment established by the late Dr. Nikit and Eleanora Ordjanian in 1988. Previous Ordjanian Visiting Professors have included Levon Abrahamian, Vardan Azatyan, Peter Balakian, Melissa Bilal, George Bournoutian, Seta Dadoyan, Cevat Dargın, Roberta Ervine, Helen Evans, Rachel Goshgarian, Arman Grigoryan, Robert Hewsen, Ohannes Kılıçdağı, Armen Marsoobian, Khatchig Mouradian, Ara Sarafian and Khachig Tololyan.

Arts & Culture

Plaintiff Who Secured Academic Freedom Sees Echoes of 'Red Scare' Today

By Jeremy C. Young and Clare Carter

As a young English professor at the University of Buffalo, Harry Keyishian was asked to sign a "loyalty" oath declaring that he had never been a member of the Communist Party. Keyishian refused and lost his job — but won something far more lasting.

Keyishian became the lead plaintiff in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, a landmark 1967 Supreme Court decision that established academic freedom as a "special consideration" that afforded professors at least as much freedom of speech as other citizens.

Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., wrote in his decision that safeguarding academic freedom is "of transcendent value to all of us, and not merely to the teachers concerned. That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment, which does not tolerate laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom. ... The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth 'out of a multitude of tongues, [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection.'"

The case largely overturned a 1952 decision, *Adler v. Board of Education*, which had held that academic freedom was outweighed by the state's "vital concern" in regulating who "shapes the attitude of young minds towards the society in which they live."

Keyishian is professor emeritus of English at Fairleigh Dickinson University and serves on the editorial board of FDU Press, which he directed from 1977 to 2017. It is not too much to say that his actions helped make the modern American definition of academic freedom possible.

PEN America's **Jeremy C. Young** recently spoke with him about his experience. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What was your reasoning when you declined to sign the loyalty oath? Was it an individual decision or something you discussed with colleagues?

The decision was accompanied by a good deal of discussion among many colleagues, especially the four other non-signers, three of whom became fellow litigants. Poet George Starbuck, working as a librarian at UB, was the first to receive and reject the Feinberg certificate, with its loyalty oath provision. Acknowledging that he had signed an oath while serving in the U.S. army, he said he would not sign "one more sweeping general promise of what I would forbid myself to think, discuss, or condone." Ralph Maud, an English scholar of the poetry of Dylan Thomas, stated that "The university is making a

see KEYISHIAN, page 15



Svante Lundgren at the statue of Mekhitar Gosh in the village of Gosh, October 2024.

Svante Lundgren

'I Always Have Armenia-related Projects

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN-LUND, Sweden — Swedish historian and writer Svante Lundgren holds a doctorate in Jewish Studies from Åbo Akademi University,

Finland. He has worked as a secondary school teacher and as a researcher and lecturer at Åbo Akademi University. He has for many years now worked as a teacher and researcher at the Center for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University. His research primarily focuses on the non-Muslim minorities of the Middle East, particularly Assyrians, Armenians and Yazidis. Additional research interests include the Armenian Genocide and Western missionary and humanitarian efforts among Ottoman Armenians. Svante Lundgren is author of number of articles and books in Swedish, English and German.

Dear Svante, you are among the rare intellectuals in Northern Europe consistently raising awareness about the plight of Eastern Christians, including Armenians. French-Armenian researcher Tigrane Yegavian, in his study *The Minorities of the Orient: The Forgotten Ones of History*, argues that there is no future anymore for non-Muslim minorities in the Middle East. Based on your research and your studies of Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter, what is your perspective on this issue?

I do not agree. If we look at the broader picture, at the whole region of the Middle East, the fact is that there are more Christians in absolute numbers now than before, although their share of the total population has decreased. However, in countries torn apart by war, like Iraq and Syria, the Christians have suffered tremendously, and their number has decreased dramatically. In other countries the situation is stable, like in Egypt with up to 10 million Christian Copts. Then there are specific situations, like the one for Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter, where the survival of a particular Christian community is at stake. I admire the courage and dedication of the young people there who have taken up the fight and I hope and pray that they will prevail.

Recently, Azerbaijan has been attempting to increase its influence in Nordic countries by organizing paid trips for individuals from Sweden and Finland. How significant could such initiatives be in shaping Scandinavian politics and public opinion?

It has some significance, but it should not be exaggerated. As these paid trips are exposed there is normally a backlash with a critical debate about why people let themselves be used by autocratic regimes. We have seen during the last years both in Sweden and Finland that these Azerbaijani initiatives result in the despotic character of the Baku regime being exposed to a wider public.

You have openly criticized the Aliyev regime. Have you ever received threats for your views?

I have never received any serious threats but a lot of hate on social media from Azerbaijani bots. And after my visit to Artsakh in 2019 my employer (Lund University) received a letter of protest from an Azerbaijani organization in Sweden,

see LUNDGREN, page 17

Hollywood Producer and Former Fashion Designer Arthur Sarkissian Joins Limitless X Holdings Board of Directors

LOS ANGELES — Limitless X Holdings Inc. announced recently the appointment of renowned Hollywood producer Arthur Sarkissian to its Board of Directors.

With more than 40 years of experience in the entertainment industry, Sarkissian brings a wealth of expertise in leadership, creativity, and entrepreneurship. His successful film production ventures, coupled with his strategic vision, will be instrumental in advancing Limitless X's growth and innovation, particularly for its new subsidiary, Limitless Films.

Sarkissian has developed and produced numerous blockbuster films that have grossed nearly \$ 1 billion worldwide. His most notable works include the "Rush Hour" franchise, "While You Were Sleeping," "Last Man Standing," "The Foreigner," "Kill the Irishman," "Memory" and many more. More recently, Sarkissian produced "The Protege," starring Maggie Q, Michael Keaton and Samuel L. Jackson, along with the action-thriller "Memory," starring Liam Neeson and "The Man You Don't Know, The story of U.S. President Donald J. Trump."

He also expanded into television, creating and producing "Vegas" in



Arthur Sarkissian, Director (left), Jas Mathur, Chairman

2012, which aired on CBS, and more recently, a "Rush Hour" spin-off series.

As a member of the Limitless X Holdings Inc. Board of Directors, Sarkissian's extensive experience will help shape the company's future trajectory, bringing fresh perspectives and strategic insights that will drive the company forward. His deep industry knowledge and innovative approach will bring fresh perspectives that drive the parent company's growth, contributing to the transformation of the "Limitless X" brand into a globally recognized household name

Limitless X Holdings Inc. is building an ecosystem designed to help individuals "Look Good and Feel Great" by integrating Health, Wellness, Entertainment, Fintech, Community Building, and Brand Development. Through its wholly-owned subsidiary, Limitless X Inc., the company specializes in direct-to-consumer eCommerce, offering products and services that empower people to reinvent themselves and become the best versions of themselves.

Plaintiff Who Secured Academic Freedom Sees Echoes of 'Red Scare' Today

KEYISHIAN, from page 14

fool of itself pretending to enforce a law against subversives by means of a fake certificate which asks everyone to say what they are not." George Hochfield, a specialist in the American Transcendentalist movement, was responding to his previous experience at Ohio State University, where left wing speakers were banned. He said that having been "rolled over" by a university administration "made me determined that I would never let it happen again." Newton Garver, a philosophy professor specializing in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited his Quaker principles, which compelled him to avoid "flattery, judicial oaths, slogans, jargon, abstractions, and hollow formalities." [Note: the quotes above are from Marjorie Heins, *Priests of Our Democracy: The Supreme Court, Academic Freedom, and the Anti-Communist Purge* (NYU Press, 2013).]

For my part, I opposed the "loyalty oath" because it represented the state of mind that supported blacklists of actors, purges of dedicated government officials, and the ugly depredations of McCarthyism. I had witnessed these as a student in the early 1950s, when several admired professors at Queens College were fired mid-semester for alleged (or perhaps actual) membership in organizations deemed subversive. For me, opposing loyalty oaths was a means of opposing a suppressive atmosphere at odds with the entire academic project. It seemed necessary to oppose all mechanisms that thwarted free expression and free discussion.

I opposed the "loyalty oath" because it represented the state of mind that supported blacklists of actors, purges of dedicated government officials, and the ugly depredations of McCarthyism.

What was the reaction to the case from your colleagues?

I must stress that my colleagues, students, and even some administrators were strongly supportive of the principles we were defending. A good number of faculty who signed their loyalty oaths did so "under protest," and I heard no convincing intellectual defense of the "security" apparatus that was being imposed on us, of which the loyalty oath was only a part. (An accompanying "statement for prospective appointees" that accompanied the oath forbade the circulation of materials deemed "subversive.") Were political science or history professors who assigned students to read *The Communist Manifesto* risking their jobs or having to censor and limit what they might ask or say about the document? The security process as stated seemed dense with ambiguities and traps. These dangers were, I believe, generally understood. Students traveled to Albany to protest SUNY offices. I believe, in fact, that members of the university administration conspired to help us mount our challenge. For example, the letter that informed me that I was not being rehired for the following year cited my refusal to sign the loyalty oath as the only reason for the university's action — that otherwise, the job was mine if I wished it. That letter was the foundation for the litigation, as it identified the single cause to which we litigants had objected. The university was not obliged to give a reason for not renewing me; they chose to do so. I think we all, in one way or another, conspired to challenge and defeat this threat to free thought and free debate.

You and your colleagues came out against the Feinberg law at your own peril, and you lost your job because of it. What did it mean to you to pay

that price? Did you ever have second thoughts?

You might be disappointed in my answer. I really cannot claim any special personal heroism in the matter. At that point in time — hard as it might be to believe now — PhDs were in demand and I felt (correctly, as it turned out) that getting a job at a private college was not going to be difficult. In fact, the following year (after I had received my PhD), I had two job offers, and selected Fairleigh Dickinson University because it was closer to New York. I wish I could play the hero in this matter, but I never feared that I was giving up my academic career. I was just losing a job (in a very good cause.)

The "case" went on its way through the courts, ferried along by our wonderful attorney, Richard Lipsitz, and required no further input (cash or comment) from me. I met my wife Marjorie at FDU — a poet, fiction writer, and journalist — and we raised four daughters. When the news was announced early in 1967 that we had prevailed, of course it was pure joy and vindication for us. The full text of Justice Brennan's ruling was reprinted in the *New York Times*, which favored the ruling, while the *Herald-Tribune* opposed it. My four colleagues and I (each settled safely somewhere) congratulated each other, and life went on.

In an interview with Bill Moyers in 1987, you and George Hochfield discuss the bill of rights and the constitution and how it serves as a "home to which we return." When you look at the censorial state legislation, and possible federal legislation, that is being discussed today, do you think that the constitution will prevail in the way that it did with your case in the 1960s?

I am not at all confident that the traditional "guard rails" of the Constitution, the Courts, and Congress will hold strong in the near future. The incoming president has already shown disdain for a number of established practices and standards — attempting to thwart the legal transfer of power, ignoring conflict of interest standards, and threatening a number of unconstitutional orders on "Day One" of his term in office. I see little evidence, so far, that Congress or the courts will effectively defend the Constitutional principles and practices he threatens to abuse. For the near future, the most effective "guard rails" against tyranny will be found outside of government, through organizations like AAUP, ACLU, the American Library Association, the Brennan Center for Justice, FIRE, and — of course — PEN America.

In Justice William J. Brennan's decision, he famously writes, "Our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us, and not merely to the teachers concerned. That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment, which does not tolerate laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom." Did you expect that kind of language coming out of the decision? What did it mean to you?

The language expressed what we litigants wished it to, and more. To a stout defense of the First Amendment, it added an acknowledgment of the special — Brennan says "transcendent" — place that academic freedom holds in the advance of knowledge. Responding to Justice Tom Clark's dissenting opinion that the decision imperiled the nation's security, Brennan answered that the surest way to prevent violent conflict was to cultivate debate and to strengthen the political processes that makes peaceable change possible. His faith in the Enlightenment Era certitudes that underlie the U.S. Constitution remains a faith I continue to hold.

I was very touched to read, in a *New Yorker* piece by journalist Nat Hentoff, that Justice Brennan had watched the Moyers



Harry Keyishian

interview when it was broadcast, and had expressed concern for us litigants, pointing out that he rarely saw the actual people behind the names on the legal documents he made judgments on. Just imagine! William Brennan sending us good wishes 20 years after the ruling! What an honor.

What similarities do you see between your situation at the University of Buffalo and the legislative trends PEN America has chronicled that restrict higher education today?

I would draw a parallel between the chilling effects of the McCarthy and "red scare" era of the 1950s and today's book bans. In both instances, the aim is to intimidate those who wish to seek information, to think and draw conclusions freely from their evidence and analysis, without fear of political consequences. I am actually gloomier about the prospects of freedom today than I was in the 1960s, when the tide of rebellion, messy as it was, was upward. I fear that the forces of repression today may be stronger, based on the behavior and character of our courts, congress, and the forthcoming executive branch.

I take comfort in the belief that when you give American students a list of forbidden books, you have simultaneously provided them with a reading list.

I am actually gloomier about the prospects of freedom today than I was in the 1960s, when the tide of rebellion, messy as it was, was upward.

Some of the legislators who have introduced laws that PEN America terms "educational gag orders," which censor speech on college campuses, claim that their proposed legislation will actually protect freedom of speech by ensuring that a certain viewpoint doesn't dominate. What are your thoughts on that?

I think that "gag orders" are the wrong way to go. They will only lead to further conflict and bring us no nearer to solutions. However, I also feel strongly that student concerns about world issues can be expressed, discussed, and contested by means other than sloganeering, sign-waving, taunts, and encampments. I am convinced that campus debates would benefit from being contained within the frameworks provided by such initiatives as the Chicago Principles (from the University of Chicago), Bridge USA, Braver Angels, and other good faith organizations that seek to foster actual consideration of the complex moral, cultural, and political challenges of our day.

If your case had been brought up today, as opposed to in the 1960s, do you think the outcome would be different?

I fear that the present majority of SCOTUS [Supreme Court of the United States] justices wish to return to the dark times of the 1950s, and perhaps create something worse with regard to the Executive branch, to which they have granted powers unknown before in constitutional history. I see little sign that the current SCOTUS majority of six is really committed to the constitutional protections and principles that we have grown to accept and cherish in America over the years of our national existence.

Tell me a bit about your career since the decision was handed down.

My scholarly interests have been wide, but my main areas of specialization at FDU have been Shakespeare and film. My 1995 book *The Shapes of Revenge* dealt with Shakespeare's treatment of victimization and revenge in his comedies, tragedies, and histories. *Screening Politics* (2003) dealt with the shifting image of the politician in American movies. I have written a book on the English novelist Michael Arlen and published an essay collection on the American author William Saroyan. By a rough count, I have published about 40 articles in my scholarly career, on a range of subjects, and reviewed books widely in scholarly journals and for Book World of the *Washington Post/Chicago Tribune*.

From 1976-1986, I was co-editor of *The Literary Review*, a journal of fiction and poetry published by FDU. From 1977-2017 I had the privilege and pleasure of serving as Director of the Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, publishing an average of 25-30 scholarly books each year.

For 25 years, from 1991-2017, I organized and conducted a daylong Shakespeare series at FDU each October, featuring invited scholars from across the nation.

I would say loudly that the costs of silence and submission are high, both for scholarship and for teaching, as well as for the future of our democracy. Upon students, scholars, and concerned citizens of our day will fall the task of reviving democracy for future generations.

What would you say to faculty today considering speaking out about legislative or university threats to academic freedom, but afraid they might face professional consequences for doing so?

I won't presume to give people advice on how to conduct themselves under threat, or what risks to take, but I would say loudly that the costs of silence and submission are high, both for scholarship and for teaching, as well as for the future of our democracy. Upon students, scholars, and concerned citizens of our day will fall the task of reviving democracy for future generations.

(This interview by PEN was originally published on January 2.)

Recipe Corner



by Christine
Vartanian Datian



Sandie Chobanian's Easy Eetch (Armenian Bulgur Salad)

HACKENSACK, N.J. — “As many Armenians will tell you, the first time they smelled the amazing aromas coming from their family kitchen was as a young child. I knew at that time that cooking was going to be one of my major callings in life. As though it was a competition, my Grandma Lucy, Aunt Takouhi, Aunt Lucia, Aunt Alice and my mother, Arax, were a formidable force of culinary talent and expertise in our kitchen in those days. It was no wonder that my dad, George Berberian, ultimately opened an Armenian restaurant in New York City. And what a fantastic restaurant it was. In the heyday of Armenian restaurants in New York City, the 1950s and 1960s, my dad's Golden Horn was the place to enjoy outstanding Armenian food. Located in Rockefeller Center on West 49th Street, it was the hub of fantastic decor, billowing tents, beautiful mosaic walls, and music. Their media dolma and ekmek kadayif were unforgettable, which is why I began collecting our family recipes and will soon introduce a cookbook for everyone to enjoy,” says Sandie Chobanian, the operations manager for Oriental Rug Specialists in Montvale, NJ.

“George Berberian with his partners created a breathtaking atmosphere, where they often invited Armenian and Middle Eastern musicians to showcase their talents on bustling Friday and Saturday nights, where customers formed lines outside waiting for a table. On Sundays after attending St. Thomas Church, our mother Arax, would drive us into New York so we could have Sunday dinner and see our dad, too. And of course, we would often take home our favorite mouthwatering Armenian foods and desserts. Famous dignitaries, and celebrities enjoyed the restaurant, too, and signed their photos to display. The Rockefeller family who owned the building at that time sold it, so eventually the restaurant was closed.” Courtesy <https://thearmeniankitchen.com/years-ago-big-apple-tasted-armenian/>

“One recipe our family often made was eetch. I believe I have perfected that recipe for everyone to make today. I am often asked to make it, so my family created a “How To Video” on YouTube for everyone to watch. It's called, “Sandie's Mediterranean Cooking Show.” This video will show you, step by step, how to make this dish.”

“This recipe is heart-healthy, and part of the Mediterranean Diet because it is nutritious and vegan. It's the perfect side dish or mezze. Check out the ways you can serve this dish, for example, my son puts hummus on pita bread and often spreads the eetch on it, sometimes adding fresh sliced chicken or beef kebob. This dish is very versatile, and everyone loves it...”

“My husband, Haig, who is deceased, and my father were oriental rug specialists in the New York area. Haig was from the Chicago and Racine areas growing up, so it was a wonderful experience to know so much about oriental

rugs. I do oriental rug appraisals now (www.orientalrugspecialists.com), and meet many interesting people. Having 10 grandchildren, life is never boring. The best advice I can give families is to include your children and grandchildren in your culinary activities, teach them the importance of keeping these family traditions and recipes alive and thriving. We all benefit from the togetherness, love, and talent we bring to the table.”

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup fine bulgur
- 1 1/2 cups Hunt's tomato sauce (at room temperature)
- 1/2 cup Real Lemon Juice (or fresh squeezed lemon juice), to taste
- 2 medium bunches scallions, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup olive oil (extra virgin), to taste

PREPARATION:

In a large bowl, combine the bulgur with the tomato sauce until the bulgur expands, slowly stirring for a few minutes. Add the lemon juice and stir for another 10 minutes longer. Add the olive oil, and stir again. Lastly, add the finely chopped scallions. Refrigerate this dish for one hour or longer before serving, if desired.

Garnish with choice of seasonings or finely chopped onions and parsley, if desired. Serve with sliced lemon wedges, Romaine lettuce, endive, pita bread and flat bread.

Serves 4.



Left to right, Sandie's Aunt Takouhi Berberian, her mother Arax Berberian, her grandmother, Lucy Sabonjian, and her Aunt Lucy Berberian. In the background is Sandie's father George Berberian in an Army uniform, the future owner of The Golden Horn Restaurant, and her grandfather, John Sabonjian next to her father. Her mother's sister, Aunt Alice, is also in the foreground. Photos courtesy Sandie Chobanian

Watch the YouTube video and for Sandie's cookbook that will be out soon.

For Sandie's YouTube video, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RrorX6bU3s>

For this recipe, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RrorX6bU3s>

For information about Sandie's family's Golden Horn Restaurant in New York, see: <https://thearmeniankitchen.com/years-ago-big-apple-tasted-armenian/>

For information about Sandie's family's oriental rug company, see: <https://www.orientalrugspecialists.com/about>

For information about Sandie's parents and family, go to: <https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/TURKMAS352/Sandie%20Chobanian.pdf>

See: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sandie-chobanian31119_newday-master-piece-faith-activity-7193585888654766081-4LgG

See: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/8bcd15ce513649c09be15960e-da64152>

Christmas Donations

Peter Balakian, Hamilton, NY \$250 — Vartkess and Rita Balian Family Foundation, Arlington, VA \$250
Gail and Richard O'Reilly, Winchester, MA \$100 — John and Debra Saryan, Andover, MA \$25

ARTS & CULTURE

Svante Lundgren: 'I Always Have Armenia-related Projects

LUNDGREN, from page 14

something I write about in my contribution to the *Armenia, mon amour* (Armenia, My Love) anthology.

Let's discuss your Armenia-related projects. A few years ago, you participated as a narrator in the acclaimed documentary "The Map of Salvation," which highlights the work of Scandinavian female missionaries who aided Armenians during the Genocide. Could you share your experience with this project?

It was a great experience although it was also tiring. There is little glamour in shooting a film, especially if it is done with a low budget. We shot the film in nine different countries and in all of them we cooperated with local Armenian communities. So, I learned to know a lot of Armenians in different places. After the film was completed, I was present at its premiere in Yerevan in April 2015. I have also been present at screenings in Sweden, Denmark, Lebanon and Los Angeles. It has been great to meet the audience; often people tell me that they have an ancestor who survived the Genocide thanks to one of these women which the movie highlights.

You mentioned the English-language anthology *Armenia, Mon Amour: Ten Europeans Speak*, which you co-edited with Finnish monk Serafim Seppälä. This collection offers fascinating "outsider" perspectives and deep insights into Armenia and its people. What inspired this project, and how has it been received?

Serafim and I had this idea that we wanted to know what has made people become like us, i.e., non-Armenians with a love for Armenia. So, we invited people belonging to this category of Armenophiles to write about this. In the end we managed to get ten contributions from ten different European countries. Those who have read the book like it a lot. Unfortunately, it has not sold as well as we expected. This can still change.

Last year, you published a Swedish-language novel, *Yerevan's Most Beautiful Eyes*. Once again, you turned to Armenian themes — this time through fiction. What does a historian bring to the world of fiction writing, and how has this new medium allowed you to explore Armenian subjects differently?

I have read a lot of feel-good novels

because they are relaxing and entertaining. They often have a similar plot: a person breaks up from his/her normal life, moves somewhere else (often to Italy or Provence) where he/she finds her true self and the love of his/her life. I decided to write a book with a similar plot but this time the protagonist does not go to any Mediterranean country, but to Armenia. This is set in 2018 so the protagonist, a sacked university lecturer from Lund, ends up amid the velvet revolution. And meets an Armenian woman with beautiful eyes.

The characters are fictional but what happens around them (the revolution) follows real events. The novel is written for people with little knowledge about Armenia. After having read it, they will know much more about Armenia — and hopefully be curious about it.

Do you have new Armenia-related projects?

I hope so, too. And I have always Armenia-related projects. In 2024 I took two tourist groups to Armenia, and I intend to go with one more this year. These one-week trips are highly appreciated and many of the participants end up as real friends of Armenia.



Svante Lundgren with his wife at the Northern Avenue in Yerevan, March 2020.

Snoop Dogg's Jewelry Line, 'Lovechild,' Is a New England affair

By Lauren Daley

PROVIDENCE (Boston.com) — There's cool, there's smoking with Snoop Dogg cool — then there's making Snoop's smoke-holder cool.

In her recent Instagram reel, noted Rhode Island jewelry designer Carolyn Rafaelian shows how she made a half pure silver/half pure copper smoke-holder for Snoop Dogg.

"This gangsta," Snoop says, lighting up later in the video, and complementing the feel even though "sh— wasn't even rolled right — it was rolled, like, little and then fat."

"Snoop's Copper Tip" was designed in Rhode Island as part of Snoop's new jewelry brand, Lovechild. Snoop has partnered with Cranston, R.I. native Rafaelian — founder of Metal Alchemist — and former Apple exec Larry Jackson of Gamma (stylized as "gamma.") for his new jewelry brand.

Each Lovechild piece will be made entirely by "master metalsmiths" in Rhode Island, with every piece crafted through "Metal Alchemist's proprietary techniques," according to their press release, and the jewelry is "designed to be worn by anyone, featuring timeless, unisex designs."

Rafaelian founded Alex and Ani in 2004 and left the company in 2020. She founded Metal Alchemist in 2022. Snoop and the New Englander were brought together by Jackson.

When Jackson "connected Snoop and me, it was pure creative chemistry," Rafaelian said in a statement. She calls Lovechild "more than just jewelry. [It's] a movement of love and purpose."



Some of the new designs for Lovechild

Everyone's favorite Paris Summer Olympics correspondent even wore a Metal Alchemist medallion in July. Made with "Liberty Copper — original copper from the Statue of Liberty," according to Metal Alchemist, it was inscribed with "Liberty Enlightens The World."

Lovechild feels an apt name for Snoop, who always seems to be brimming with good vibes, and a childlike charm.



Snoop Dogg hugs Carolyn Rafaelian (Boston.com photo)

"I chose to name the collection Lovechild because I felt like the world is so full of anger and negativity, and division, and I know that I lead with love," Snoop said in a video on the line's website.

with love, and being a kid all the time. So I am the lovechild and this brand represents the lovechild."

He wants people to feel "the energy that we try to put in the world: People moving together, people being together. Love. That's what this sh— is about."

Rafaelian tweeted on Tuesday: "when God gives you the biggest microphone in the world, you talk about love," and linked a video to a launch event. In the video, she calls Snoop "someone who is world class in love, in peace, in joy and shares that with the word— I, I get to create with him." Learn more or shop here.

CALENDAR

OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

MASSACHUSETTS

JANUARY 13 — Saint James Men's Club Dinner 6:15 mezza , 7:00pm dinner Losh-Kebab and Kheyima, joint dinner with the Knights, Guest speakers; Attorneys Vasken Babigian and Shawn Keefe will discuss real estate law [including condominium conversions]. Having a combined 40+ years of experience, Vasken and Shawn possess a wealth of experience. \$25 dinner. All are welcome. Monday, St. James Armenian Church, 465 Mount Auburn Street Watertown.

JANUARY 29 — Gift Planning for an Enduring Legacy: Wednesday, 5 to 6 p.m. Virtual presentation by Ken Dolbashian, noted expert in charitable gift planning. Program of the Friends of Armenian Heritage Park. For details and to register, ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar

FEBRUARY 1 — Tekeyan Cultural Association Boston Chapter Valentine's Soiree: dining, wine and music. Pianist Marina Margarian, violinist Armenuhi Hovakimyan, 8 p.m. Baikar Center, 755 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown, \$75/person, RSVP: Sossy Yogurtian 617 281-1647 or syogurtian@comcast.net

FEBRUARY 8 — Valentine's with Frank Sinatra, featuring Rich DiMare, hosted by Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church. An unforgettable evening featuring a specially crafted dinner sponsored by Fiorella's. Saturday, 6 p.m., Nishan and Margrit Atinizian Hall, 200 Lexington St., Belmont. Tickets \$85. (617) 489-2280 or email:holycrossbostonma@gmail.com.

FEBRUARY 24 — UNDER THE SNOW MOON. Monday, 4 p.m., virtually, to keep connected. Program of the Friends of Armenian Heritage Park. For details and to register, ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar

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, \$58www.globalartslive.org/content/event_page/10301

APRIL 10 — LET'S PARTY FOR THE PARK! Thursday, 7-9 p.m. Abigail Adams Ballroom, InterContinental Hotel, Boston. Benefit to raise funds to Care for & Maintain Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway. Advance Reservations only. For reservations, ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Support

SEPTEMBER 20 — CELEBRATE ARMENIA! Culture, Heritage & Traditions. Saturday, 12noon-8pm. Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston. Program of the KAMURJNER ("Bridges") Cultural Connections and Friends of Armenian Heritage Park. Rain Date: September 27. Details forthcoming.

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.



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How Charles Michel Waded into A minefield in Nagorno-Karabakh

By Gabriel Gavin

Ruben Petrosyan was getting ready for work when he heard the first explosion.

The father of three had a desk in the unassuming office building that housed Nagorno-Karabakh's security services. For weeks, he and his colleagues had known something big was coming. They knew it when their wives came back empty-handed after lining up at the shops for rations of bread and sour cream. They knew it when troops on the contact line spotted a massive Azerbaijani build up. And they knew it on Tuesday September 19, 2023, when the war started.

Minutes before the first barrage began, up in the hills, volunteers and conscripts serving in the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army began noticing that the Russian peacekeepers who stood between them and enemy lines were jumping into vehicles and leaving in a hurry. Across the dusty gulf of no-man's-land, they could see camouflage netting being pulled off Azerbaijani military hardware and ambulances lining up on the asphalt roads leading to the positions opposite, flanked by barbed wire and landmines.

Ruben's wife, Nouné, had taken their two girls to the dentist. He grabbed his jacket and ran out of the house to go and pick them up. An air raid siren was ringing out all over the city, families were racing to the shelters, shops pulling down their metal shutters. The streets were a picture of chaos and confusion, the roads choked with parents trying to pick up their children from schools and kindergartens across town. Ruben found his family, took them to a shelter under a church next to the security services building, then went into work. They didn't know it yet, but Nouné and the children would spend the next six days there.

As the Russians abandoned their posts — reneging on their pledge to protect the breakaway region following a war in 2020 — Nagorno-Karabakh's troops dug in for what would be the final battle in three decades of fighting over the territory, inside Azerbaijan's internationally-recognized borders but held by Armenian separatists since the fall of the Soviet Union. Within a week, local forces had been overwhelmed and the entire population was packing its bags to flee, taking what few possessions they could pack into cars or strap on the top of buses as they did.

The violent end of Nagorno-Karabakh may have been a sign of Russia's diminishing influence as a result of its catastrophic invasion of Ukraine, but it was a personal defeat too for the then-president of the European Council, Charles Michel. At the same time as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was negotiating new fossil fuel deals with Baku, the bloc's frequently sidelined other leader was trying to take on the role of mediator in the country's conflict with Armenia.

The mild-mannered Belgian, an ex-prime minister, was theoretically in charge of the EU's foreign policy but, in practice, spent his time picking individual issues to weigh in on. For nearly two years, whenever journalists reached out to Michel's office with queries about some aspect of European affairs, they were batted away with a simple answer: He was busy trying to prevent a war in the South Caucasus.

Eyeing the power vacuum created by Russia's strategic collapse in its former imperial hinterlands, this was an opportunity for the EU to step up, bolster its influence and replace Moscow's brutal realpolitik with values-based humanitarian considerations. But, despite efforts to build relations with both sides, Michel's campaign suffered from a fundamental failure to understand who he was dealing with — or how high the stakes were.

If Armenia and Azerbaijan were talking, the Eurocrats concluded, at least it meant they weren't shooting at each other. But, in reality, they were doing both. The near-daily clashes claiming hundreds of soldiers' lives along the line of contact continued unabated, and EU officials, determined not to lose their role as impartial facilitators, refused to comment on who was to blame. Whenever there was even a hint of criticism aimed at Baku, Azerbaijan's most prominent commentators would loudly warn that the EU was losing its perceived neutrality.

To speak to officials in Brussels was to enter a parallel universe where everything was moving in the right direction. Careful diplomacy was the only way to prevent misunderstandings, they had opined in 2022, when Azerbaijan launched its Two Day War against Armenia. The talks were really promising, they insisted a few months later, as the blockade began and people started to starve.

Peace, they maintained, had never been closer — just as it seemed more than ever like another war was on the cards. Every move Azerbaijan made to bring about the inevitable showdown shifted the frame of reference for diplomacy; they might have imposed the blockade but they've at least now agreed to let the Red

Cross operate, so that's a positive development, the thinking went. Baku was taking three steps forward and winning plaudits whenever it moved a millimeter back.

The heart of the problem was that the people in the room simply weren't qualified to deal with the conflict they had waded into. Wars in and around Europe for almost the entire post-World War II history of the continent had been dealt with either by individual member countries, by the U.S. or, more recently, by NATO. There simply wasn't the institutional knowledge or understanding of how to conduct this kind of high-stakes foreign policy among officials in the European Council or the European External Action Service.

In the arena of Western politics where they'd cut their teeth, the worst imaginable outcome was that a poorly phrased missive might rile an EU country's prime minister or upset an industry lobby group. Now, they'd inserted themselves into a bitter ethnic dispute where the worst thing that could happen was somebody burning down your house and cutting your head off. That was simply unimaginable for career diplomats who put total faith in the idea that no problem was too big to be sorted out over a plate of sandwiches in a Brussels meeting room.

And while the EU had been represented in talks over other international crises, like the Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian War, it had played second fiddle to more serious diplomatic services like those of the US, France and Britain. Now, Brussels thought it had what it took to run the show.

That paradigm counted doubly for Michel. His team constantly talked up his credentials as the former prime minister of Belgium. But being at the helm of a tiny Western European nation with no notable active foreign policy conflicts or international disputes did not instantly turn a lifelong centrist politician into a titan on the world stage. Worse still, he wasn't even a titan in his own office.

As European Commission president, von der Leyen wielded far more practical power than Michel did in his largely symbolic role. And she was set on doing her gas deal with Baku, no matter whether it compromised Michel's ability to act as a mediator or not. The pair had a famously fractious relationship, both vying to position themselves as the true owner of key issues like foreign affairs. In 2021, during a joint meeting with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, von der Leyen was visibly shocked when her Belgian colleague darted in to grab the only available chair opposite the Turkish president, relegating her to a nearby couch.

But, as the offensive began, triggering the mass exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh, Michel dropped what had been his flagship issue faster than anyone could have expected. Apart from an initial call for restraint and respect for the rights of the Karabakh Armenians on Twitter, he almost never again commented on the issue publicly.

Through the 24 hours of fighting, and the four days of chaos and uncertainty that followed, those in the Nagorno-Karabakh security services had tried to do their jobs as best they could, coordinating the response and tracking the enemy troops getting closer and closer to the capital. Now they'd done all they could. Ruben Petrosyan had left the office to try and gather what he could from his house, in a suburb where there had been sightings of Azerbaijani forces.

There was a suitcase by the door, stuffed with all the pictures Nouné had taken down off the walls, along with documents and some essentials for their children. It had been there since after the 2020 war. Now, friends, cousins and colleagues were ringing around desperately trying to work out how to make their escape. The Facebook pages and message groups that they'd used to swap scant supplies during the blockade suddenly lit up again.

"Doesn't anyone have two liters of petrol? That's how much it should take to get to Kornidzor."

"Who has a truck that can carry furniture? I can pay."

"Is anyone from Berdashen village? My mother lives there and I can't get in touch with her."

Already having been let down by Russia, the murderous, disinterested state that had once claimed to be their ally, other Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians began wondering whether they had been truly left to fend for themselves. After 24 hours on the road fleeing his homeland, a 58-year-old former security guard called Spartak had some questions of his own.

"Everyone is saying they care about us, but where are they?" he asked, sitting in the leafy garden of a hotel serving as an emergency shelter. "Where is France? Where is America? Where is Charles Michel?"

(*Ashes of Our Fathers: Inside the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh* By Gabriel Gavin was published Jan. 9, 2025, by Hurst and Oxford University Press. Gabriel Gavin covered the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh for POLITICO. The above is an excerpt from the book.)



COMMENTARY

MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

Lladro Produces 'Karabakh Horse' Porcelain Figurines as Propaganda for Azerbaijan

Regrettably, the only things that matter in this world are money and power. All the other issues that naïve people put a value on, such as truth, justice, and human rights, are self-defeating delusions. Rich and powerful people and countries can do almost anything they want. The only ones that can stop them are those who possess greater power. The weak are at the mercy of the powerful wolves.

These thoughts came to my mind as I received an email from the Lladro Company, which is world famous for the porcelain figurines it produces in Valencia, Spain. A lot of people have valuable collections of Lladro figurines in their homes. They are frequently given as gifts.

The email I received from Lladro was a pitch to sell its latest porcelain figurine named: 'Karabakh Horse.' Next to the image of a horse, the email stated: "The Karabakh horse is a symbol of Azerbaijan's cultural legacy and its indomitable spirit. Our artists have portrayed it in porcelain, underscoring the elegance and beauty of this unique breed. Following ancient tradition, the horse is covered with a Karabakh rug with its rightly famous patterns decorated in intense colors and golden lusters. Discover all the details of this specimen, available in a limited edition."

In the above short paragraph, Lladro made several factual errors. First of all, the Karabakh horse cannot be a symbol of Azerbaijan since Karabakh (Artsakh) is a part of historic Armenia. To make matters worse, Lladro falsely added that this horse is a symbol of Azerbaijan's "cultural legacy and its indomitable spirit." There is no such thing as Azerbaijan's "cultural legacy" since the country is a little over 100 years old. I also don't understand Lladro's reference to Azerbaijan's "indomitable spirit." Where did that "indomitable spirit" come from? Azerbaijan, during its short-lived history, has engaged in barbaric beheadings of Armenian prisoners of war, committed massacres, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, destroyed Armenian churches and cultural monuments, distorted history, and committed massive violations of the human rights of

its own citizens, including the jailing of journalists and political dissidents on trumped-up charges.

Since I know very little about horses, I searched about the "Karabakh horse" on the Internet. Here is what I found: "The Karabakh horse breed is influenced by Persian horses and other breeds like the Akhal-Teke, Kabarda, Turkoman, and Arabian horses." The Akhal-Teke horse originates from Turkmenistan, while the Kabarda from the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic in Russia. I don't see any reference to Azerbaijan in that sentence.

In another obvious error, Lladro explained in its email that "Karabakh Horse" means 'golden horse.' This is false. The name Karabakh is composed of two words: 'Kara' which means black in Turkish and 'bagh' which means garden in Farsi. Therefore, Karabakh means Black Garden.

Lladro is selling the "Karabakh Horse" porcelain figurine for \$6,580 each. It is a 'limited edition' production with only 750 copies. It weighs 20 lbs. The dimensions are: 17 inches (high), 20 inches (wide), and 8 inches (long).

To promote the "Karabakh Horse" figurine, Lladro held its unveiling at the Shirvanshah Palace Museum in Baku, where the Azerbaijan National Conservatory provided a live musical concert. The guest speaker was Yashar Quluza-de, the owner of the largest number of actual Karabakh horses.

To represent Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, and promote the Karabakh horse worldwide, Pres. Aliyev gifted in 2022 a Karabakh horse and two equestrian-themed sculptures to Queen Elizabeth II of England. This is the second time that the Queen has received a Karabakh horse from Azerbaijan. The first one was in 1956.

Since the only thing Lladro executives care about is profit, Armenians and their supporters should counter the use of the Karabakh horse as a tool for Azeri propaganda by boycotting the purchase of all Lladro products. Complaints should be sent to Ana Rodríguez Nogueiras, the Chief Executive Officer of Lladro. Her email is: agonzalez@es.lladro.com.

I do not know what kind of business arrangements have been made between Azerbaijan's leaders and Lladro. Who is getting what percentage of the sales and who is personally benefiting from the resulting income?

It is surprising that the Karabakh Horse figurines are still not sold out since they were launched several months ago. Since Azeri leaders donate lavish gifts to foreign dignitaries visiting Azerbaijan, why haven't they purchased all 750 copies of the Karabakh Horse porcelain and given them as souvenirs? I am certain that Pres. Aliyev, who is a billionaire, can easily afford to purchase all 750 copies at \$6,580 each for a total cost of \$4.9 million.

Erdoğan's Demands On Jerusalem Could Raise Questions About Istanbul's Sovereignty

By Michael Rubin

WASHINGTON (Middle East Forum Observer) — On December 22, 2024, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rallied a crowd of his Islamist supporters in Mardin, not far from the Syrian border. As his supporters chanted, "Mr. President, take us to Jerusalem," Erdoğan paused and then promised, "Patience brings victory." His comments came less than five months after he appeared to threaten war on Israel.

His latest threats were not spontaneous. On October 1, 2020, Erdoğan declared, "Jerusalem is our city." Turkey's National Assembly — essentially a hollowed-out, rubber stamp for Erdoğan's agenda — has put Jerusalem's conquest high on its agenda. "Türkiye stands by the Palestinian cause, with all its institutions, government, the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, and most importantly, with its nation. I wholeheartedly believe that, in the coming period, Palestine will be liberated," Parliamentary Speaker Numan Kurtulmuş declared on October 16, 2024. Lest Turkey's usual apologists seek to spin or obfuscate the intent of his statements, both Erdoğan's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) ally Devlet Bahçeli and Erdoğan's son Bilal promised to take the fight to Jerusalem.

No one should doubt that Erdoğan means it. Like Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Erdoğan has faced increasing health challenges, perhaps leading him to consider his mortality and his legacy. Erdoğan is obsessed with his own imagined glory. Privately, he despises Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, for building a new and decidedly Western-influenced state to replace the decaying Ottoman Empire in Anatolia. While Erdoğan will not criticize Atatürk

directly, he telegraphs his disdain for Turkey's alcoholic founder with symbolism. In June 2005, Erdoğan changed the backdrop for his monthly television address. Gone was the portrait of Atatürk and the Turkish flag; in their place, was the Anıtkabir — Atatürk's mausoleum — and a mosque. The message Erdoğan sought to project to Turks was clear: Atatürk is dead, but Islam lives.

As ambitious and politically skilled as Erdoğan is, he is not smart. His failure to win admission to Turkey's top schools chafes him. As a narcissist, Erdoğan blames everyone but himself, and as an autocrat, he surrounds himself with sycophants who affirm anything Erdoğan may propose. This is why the Turkish dictator constantly stumbles over precedent.

When Erdoğan proposed voiding the Treaty of Lausanne to change Turkey's borders, for example, he never considered that the changes need not go Turkey's

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way. If Erdoğan wants to rectify historical wrongs, why shouldn't Izmir revert to Smyrna, for example? After all, Turkey's possession of Smyrna was solely due to its ethnic cleansing.

Back to Jerusalem: If Erdoğan wants to change the status of Jerusalem, a city holy to multiple religions, why should the same precedent not apply to Istanbul [Constantinople]? After all, while the Israelis guarantee religious freedom in Jerusalem and protect the sanctity of its many Jewish, Christian, and Islamic holy sites, the same cannot be said for Erdoğan's stewardship of Istanbul. The issue is not only the conversion of the Hagia Sophia to an active mosque. Just this year, Erdoğan's regime desecrated the Byzantine Church of St. Savior in Chora, a UNESCO World Heritage Site,

by transforming it into a mosque. Erdoğan's actions simply continue his "salami slicing" tactics of destroying Greek Orthodox heritage and belying his own diplomats' statements that Turkey respects and protects its Christian and Jewish heritage.

The Armenians, of course, fared even worst. Some of Turkey's richest men built their affluence on confiscated and stolen Armenian property. Much of Incirlik Air Base, in which the United States Air Force stations more than 1,800 people, is built on confiscated Armenian land. In 2012, the Hrant Dink Foundation published a book identifying more than 600 properties in Istanbul alone seized by the Turkish government. Turkey roots its Armenian Genocide denial in not only religious hatred and racism, but a desire to cover up the theft of a century.

The Trump administration is not afraid to break diplomatic china. For years until President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the State Department counted Jerusalem as a consulate unattached to any country. A decade ago, the US Supreme Court even considered the demand that US citizens born in Jerusalem have their place listed as Israel, rather than as Jerusalem, like Secretary of State John Kerry demanded. Because the United States does not recognize Communist China's takeover of Hong Kong, the US consulate in Hong Kong continues to enjoy independent status rather than formal subordination to the US Embassy in Beijing. Perhaps, then, the State Department and its European partners should make their consulates in Istanbul independent entities to recognize the disputed nature of Turkey's largest city. The State Department also should recognize Istanbul's unique status by formally redesignating its consulate as the US Consulate to Constantinople/Istanbul.

Turkey has failed to uphold religious freedom; indeed, Erdoğan has shown disdain and violence toward the Greek Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic and Catholic churches. Members of Turkey's dwindling Jewish community are de facto hostages of the Turkish state, living each day in fear that the extremists Turkey trains will turn their guns on them.

As Erdoğan seeks to raise questions of sovereignty in Jerusalem, he sets a precedent that every freedom-seeking country should seize to question Turkey's stewardship of Istanbul and to study openly the city's status and Turkey's sovereignty.



Zourabichvili Strives to Remain Relevant for Protest Movement

By Brawley Benson

With the holiday season wrapping up, attention in Georgia is once again fixing on the country's political standoff between the Georgian Dream-dominated government and its opponents.

Salome Zourabichvili, who asserts she remains Georgia's legitimate president, opted to vacate the presidential palace in late December to avoid a direct confrontation with her Georgian Dream antagonists. Having served as the chief catalyst for opposition to Georgian Dream's efforts to alter the country's geopolitical course, Zourabichvili is striving to remain a relevant political actor.

A few days after leaving the palace, Zourabichvili stood alongside protesters during New Year's Eve festivities. "2025 will be a truly victorious year," she said in an address that evening. Government opponents assert the ruling party engineered an illegitimate victory in October's parliamentary election, and are calling for new elections.

"It remains to be seen whether [Zourabichvili] will manage to be first among equals of the opposition," Kornely Kakachia, the director of the Georgian Institute of Politics, said in an interview. He explained that the key players in the protest movement opposing Georgian Dream are civil society activists and young people, not opposition politicians.

Under the circumstances, Kakachia said Zourabichvili would need to shed her presidential persona and create "some sort of new role" to maintain legitimacy as the symbolic leader of protests, particularly for Western observers.

"The major issue here will be what the West will decide and how they will see [Zourabichvili's] role, especially the United States," Kakachia added.

Since the protests intensified in late November, the opposition movement has

shifted, however, in late January when Donald Trump returns to the US presidency.

At this point, Georgian Dream's strategy for handling anti-government protests seems to be running out the clock. Georgian Dream officials have publicly stated

Georgian Dream leaders are miscalculating if they think Trump will come to their rescue. The Trump administration will likely be "inactive" in the South Caucasus, an expert on Georgian politics told Eurasianet shortly after the election. At the same time, there are bipartisan voices in Washington pushing for a strong response to Georgia's democratic backsliding.

On January 3, lawmakers reintroduced the so-called MEGOBARI Act, which would pave the way for fresh sanctions on government officials. This comes after the US already sanctioned Georgian Dream's leader and honorary chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili, in late December.

One of the bill's sponsors, Joe Wilson, a South Carolina Republican, is an outspoken critic of Georgian Dream and maintains that Zourabichvili is still the "legitimate" president. In a late-December interview with the Georgian bureau of RFE/RL, Wilson rejected the ruling party's assumption that incumbent authorities in Tbilisi will find common ground with the Trump administration.

"I think they have a completely wrong idea about Donald Trump," Wilson told RFE/RL. "He is a supporter of freedom and democracy and supports leaders like President [Zourabichvili], who is speaking out against the war criminal Putin. Trump is a proponent of negotiations [with other countries], but when he sees that a deal cannot be made, he acts decisively."

(Brawley Benson is a Tbilisi-based reporter and recent graduate of the Columbia Journalism School who writes about Russia and the countries around it. Follow him on X at @BrawleyEric. This story originally appeared on Eurasianet.org on January 7.)



Salome Zourabichvili

drawn support from the United States and European Union, which have sanctioned Georgian leaders for halting the country's constitutionally mandated efforts to integrate with Western political and economic institutions. The US and EU stance could

that they are waiting for Trump's inauguration on January 20, believing he will end the "practice of blackmail by certain European politicians and officials," according to Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze.

Independent observers, however, suggest



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