

Syunik’s Iranian Consulate General Celebrates Third Anniversary, Cementing Armenian-Iranian Relations

By Aram Arkun
Mirror-Spectator Staff

KAPAN, Armenia — The Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Kapan, the capital of Armenia’s southern-most province of Syunik, celebrated its third anniversary with an evening event on October 16. A delegation from the Iranian embassy in Yerevan came for the occasion, and guests included most of Syunik province’s high level Armenian officials.

Sherly Avedian, the director of the cultural division of the consulate general and a translator, as well as representative of UNESCO in Iran concerning the historical Christian churches there, read a welcoming statement in Armenian. She is author of the bilingual Persian/English book *Armenian Churches in Iran* (Tehran, 2024).



Acting Ambassador Bahram Taheri of the Islamic Republic of Iran being photographed while speaking (photo Aram Arkun)

Avedian noted the many cultural and educational activities, including joint festivals, exhibitions, and concerts carried out through the work of the consulate general over the last three years. She cited agreements signed between Armenian and Iranian universities and educational institutions and reciprocal touristic programs. Those who go to Iran, she observed, get to see the Iranian-Armenian community and its cultural, historical and spiritual heritage.

The consulate general helped facilitate the construction of the Meghri-Kajaran road, Avedian said, and it followed the work of the two Iranian contractor constructions companies at the border of Syunik and Iran. It maintained good relations with the Armenian police and patrol services to help Iranian travelers and truck drivers.

Avedian concluded by expressing appreciation on behalf of the consulate general for the assistance shown by Syunik’s investigative officials, medical centers, municipal and provincial government officials, cultural and sports centers, and other local institutions.

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Exploring National Security Dimension of AI Development in Armenia

By Irakli Machaidze
Armenia is reassessing its national security foundation with the evident aim of replacing military might with economic power as the central pillar for ensuring sovereignty. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is a leading advocate of remaking Armenia’s security architecture. “When the army is your primary tool for security, you could say you have no security at all,” he said at a September conference dedicated to security issues. “The military should be the last tool in the security system. And the more tools you have before it, the better.”

Pashinyan wants to make a strong economy the most powerful instrument in his national security toolkit. The \$500-million plan to build the region’s first artificial intelligence hub in Armenia highlights Pashinyan’s strategy. The initiative took a major step forward in November when US regulators approved the transfer of advanced Nvidia Blackwell GPUs.

The project, led by Firebird, a startup apparently bankrolled by an ultra-wealthy member of the Armenian diaspora, is backed by the Armenian government.



In pivoting to AI, Armenia is striving to take advantage of its strong educational tradition in such areas as mathematics and engineering, as well as its vibrant tech and innovation sector (photo gov.am)

The operating model gives Yerevan a substantive stake in how future AI capabilities develop in the region. That matters as AI moves deeper into sensitive sectors such as healthcare, finance and national security. AI has been described as the 21st

century version of electricity, with GPU farms compared to generators: Armenian officials and experts believe that building a big lead in this area will foster a deep sense of security.

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Priests Forced Out of Gyumri Church for Service Attended By Pashinyan

By Satenik Kaghzvantsyan
GYUMRI (Azatutyun) — Priests serving at the main church of Gyumri were forced to leave it ahead of a mass on Sunday, December 7, held there by renegade clerics as part of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s intensifying efforts to depose Catholicos Karekin II. Pashinyan attended it along with scores of his political allies and government and law-enforcement officials. Pashinyan has made a point of attending weekly liturgies in different churches in recent weeks in a bid to step up the pressure on the supreme head of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Parish priests that presided over those services deliberately failed to mention Karekin in their prayers and sermons, breaking a centuries-old rule. Two of them have already been defrocked by the church’s Mother See in Echmiadzin as a result. Stoking opposition accusations of abuse of power, Pashinyan admitted

last week that the National Security Service (NSS), the former Armenian branch of the Soviet KGB secret police, has been trying to have liturgies censored this way.

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Pashinyan Proposes Playing National Anthem Before Armenian Liturgies

By Xandie (Alexandra) Kuenning
Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has suggested that the choirs in all Armenian Apostolic churches perform the national anthem prior to Sunday morning services. The proposal comes amidst increasing tensions between the government and the Church ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections. Pashinyan first wrote a short post on Facebook on the evening of Sunday, December 7, with his suggestion, writing that the Armenian Apostolic Church was established “by the state, by state decision” in 301 AD.

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Police and other security personnel guard the entrance to the Holy Mother of God Cathedral, Gyumri, December 7, 2025

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ANNUAL WINTER BREAK
The *Mirror-Spectator's* last 2025 issue is dated December 27. After a week's break we return with the issue of January 10. *Happy Holidays!*



ARMENIA

NEWS from ARMENIA

Dust Levels Exceed Safe Limits in Yerevan

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Yerevan's Hydrometeorology and Monitoring Center has published the results of atmospheric air quality monitoring for the period from November 26 to December 2, 2025. According to the report, dust concentrations in several parts of the city exceeded the maximum allowable limits.

However, testing showed that sulfur dioxide levels across all districts remained below the maximum allowable concentration during the monitoring period.

Masked Men Attack Former MP

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Lawyer Ruben Melikyan said that a violent assault was carried out against former MP Mihran Hakobyan in the parking lot of Yerevan's Dalma Mall on December 8. He described the incident as a "bandit-style attack," stating that the assailants wore masks and ambushed Hakobyan from behind.

"Mihran sustained bodily injuries and is now being transported to Izmirlian Medical Center," Melikyan wrote. He added that such attacks could have been prevented if law enforcement had properly investigated the 2021 grenade attack near Hakobyan's home.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, police received a report from Izmirlian Medical Center letting them know of Melikyan's injuries.

The incident is under investigation.

Church Urges Return To Tradition after Political Intervention

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — The Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin on December 8 issued a strong condemnation of recent developments involving state authorities, including law enforcement, intervening in church rituals.

The statement says these actions were carried out under the leadership of the prime minister, violating both church canons and Armenia's Constitution, offending believers, and sowing division within the Church.

"By bypassing the spiritual authority of the diocesan primate and disregarding ecclesiastical order, the participation of any bishop in such services constitutes a serious canonical violation, as happened at the Cathedral of the Holy Mother of God (Yot Verk) in the Shirak Diocese," the statement reads.

The Mother See urged the bishops who breached canon law to cease their misguided conduct and refrain from making false and misleading public statements. They were called to return to the canonical framework, uphold centuries-old traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and act solely within the spiritual domain, with full awareness of their mission and duty as successors in the apostolic lineage.



Speakers in Hamburg

Engage Armenia Reached Its 7th Country in Two Years Meeting Diaspora Where They Live

YEREVAN — Repat Armenia's Engage Armenia Forums, funded by the H. Hovnanian Family Foundation, have become the first Armenia-based initiative to travel directly to Diaspora communities worldwide. In less than two years, over 1,300 diasporans have been engaged across seven countries — the UK, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, the UAE, and now Germany. This November, the Forum brought 13 organizations and 15 speakers from Armenia to Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, Hamburg, and Berlin, engaging over 400 participants and proving Germany to be one of the tour's most impactful stops.

Launched in 2013 as Imagine Armenia and reintroduced in 2024 as Engage Armenia, the initiative responds to a simple reality: Armenia needs active global involvement, especially in uncertain times. The tour travels directly to Diaspora communities: to open doors, remove barriers, and ensure that every Armenian no matter where they live can take part in strengthening the homeland.

Five Days, Five Cities, Hundreds Engaged Across Germany

The Engage Armenia Forum in Germany was held from November 4-8, 2025, across Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, Hamburg,

and Berlin. Every morning, the team of 15 speakers from Armenia boarded an early train to the next city — a demanding five-day journey that welcomed over 400 participants, the majority being professionals between 25 and 45 years old. The turnout far exceeded expectations, confirming a strong and growing interest in meaningful engagement with Armenia. Despite Germany not being the most obvious choice, with vast distances and varying community structures, it quickly proved to be one of the most impactful destinations yet.

"The world isn't a giant Bundesliga. We can't just sit in the stadium and watch. Nations that succeed are the ones that solve their own problems. No country owes us guarantees — but together, we can build our own," said Sevan Kabakian, director of Birthright Armenia, during his opening speech.

Throughout the tour, participants explored opportunities in volunteering, education, tech, entrepreneurship, healthcare, culture, and repatriation, with especially high interest in business development, investment, and professional volunteering. Attendees also echoed a core message emphasized at each stop: Armenia's security depends not only on military strength, but

on people stepping forward and contributing skill, stability, and connection.

One participant in Berlin shared a powerful personal experience: "I came to Armenia three years ago to offer my help and support, but no one really understood what I hoped to contribute. Today, you came to where I live and answered all the questions I had back then. I was nearly in tears with happiness listening to each pitch. I will definitely join AVC to volunteer and put my skills to use — it's exactly what I wanted to do three years ago."

Organizations that participated included: Birthright Armenia, Teach For Armenia, TUMO — David Breuer; Big Mind Academy, VIA Fund / Impact HUB, Health For Armenia, eqwefy, Optimize Consulting, reArmenia Academy, M.A.M Educational Movement, Primavera Foundation and Repat Armenia.

All events were hosted by Nelly Poliakov (H. Hovnanian Family Foundation).

With seven countries reached in two years, the tour is preparing for new destinations — with Canada now under consideration for 2026. Wherever Armenians are ready to engage, Engage Armenia will continue building the bridges that bring them closer to the homeland.

Azerbaijan Expanding Destruction of Artsakh Cultural Heritage, Ombudsperson Warns

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — Artsakh's Cultural Heritage Ombudsman Hovik Avanesov says the destruction of its historical sites under Azerbaijani control is accelerating despite international concern.

Speaking to Panorama.am on Saturday, December 6, Avanesov said satellite monitoring shows a growing number of cases of systematic vandalism targeting cultural, religious and architectural monuments.

According to him, some incidents are openly documented by Azerbaijani state media. He cited the demolition of the former foreign ministry building in Stepanakert on September 2, the date marking Artsakh's independence, carried out with heavy construction machinery.

Avanesov said methods of destruction are evolving and now include widespread fires. Large-scale blazes that broke out across multiple settlements from late June reached areas containing more than 100

historical monuments, including forest-adjacent cemeteries where headstones and inscriptions were damaged. New fires were reported in Kashatagh and Karvachar districts in late November.

"This is not accidental. Fires are also used to erase evidence of vandalism," he said.

Avanesov added that Islamic heritage has also been targeted, pointing to the destruction of the mosque in Aygek village, documented through satellite imagery. He said many demolitions are carried out under the pretext of construction or renovation, echoing practices he says were used in Soviet-era Shushi, where historical stonework was repurposed as building material.

He also raised concerns about reported archaeological excavations at several sites, including the Azokh cave, which Armenian experts warned could distort the historical record.

Avanesov said Azerbaijani officials have

openly signaled plans to remove monuments and buildings constructed between the 1980s and 2023, citing alleged seismic or architectural issues, claims he dismissed as unfounded.

"The entire cultural heritage in Artsakh is at risk of complete eradication," he said, arguing that the losses carry global significance. "By destroying these monuments, Azerbaijan is striking at world civilization."

He urged international organizations to move beyond issuing statements and adopt mechanisms capable of curbing further damage.

Avanesov also voiced alarm over the fate of Stepanakert's Memorial Complex, which remains sealed off, and said Azerbaijani social media users repeatedly call for the destruction of the We Are Our Mountains monument, a widely recognized symbol of Artsakh, and for the conversion or demolition of two churches in Stepanakert.



ARMENIA

Priests Forced Out of Gyumri Church for Service Attended By Pashinyan

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In a joint statement issued on Saturday, all 29 priests of the Shirak Diocese of the church comprising Gyumri reaffirmed their allegiance to Karekin, saying that they will not bow to government demands to avoid any public reference to him. They denounced the impending “seizure” of the city’s Holy Mother of God Cathedral, also known as the Church of the Seven Wounds. “The Seven Wounds has survived two Turkish occupations and will survive this as well,” read the statement.

One of the signatories, Farther Nshan Panforyorov, said afterwards that unnamed security officials told him and the other clerics serving at the cathedral to hand in its keys. He said they refused while deciding to seal the church’s doors with paper and leave it on Saturday night.

Officials opened the doors the following morning ahead of the mass led by another priest brought in from another region of Armenia. Predictably, the latter failed to mention Karekin or the jailed primate of the Shirak Diocese, Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan, during the ensuing service held amid unusually heavy police presence in and around the church located at the main square of Armenia’s second largest city.

Several believers chanted Karekin’s name during the service. At least two of them were forcibly removed from the 19th-century church moments later. A number of other citizens were unable to enter the church guarded by many untrained police and plainclothes officers.

Meanwhile, the Gyumri clergy held a Sunday mass at a larger church close to the Seven Wounds. It was packed with hundreds of local residents.

“A liturgy performed by brute force is not a liturgy,” Panforyorov told reporters

after Pashinyan and his entourage left the Seven Wounds.

Parliament speaker Alen Simonyan, one of the officials accompanying Pashinyan in Gyumri, denied that the local cathedral was seized by the authorities in breach of the Armenian constitution guaranteeing the church’s separation from the state. He reiterated government demands for Karekin’s resignation that have been backed by a dozen bishops and archbishops. Four of those clergymen were also present at the Gyumri

of Pashinyan arrested in nearly six months.

Citing the latest arrest and other “repressions against clergy,” the Mother See announced later on Sunday the postponement of an emergency conference of bishops scheduled for December 10-12. The gathering was due to “examine the latest developments surrounding the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church.”

The ancient church, to which the vast majority of Armenians belong, has at least 55 bishops and archbishops around the world.



Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and other officials attend a church service in Gyumri, December 7, 2025

service attended by Pashinyan.

The Catholicos again rejected those demands late on Saturday as he was greeted by hundreds of supporters at Yerevan’s Zvartnots airport on his return from a visit to Switzerland and France. He also decried “baseless and trump-up accusations” leveled against Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan last week.

Khachatryan, who heads the church’s Mother See Chancellery, is the fourth senior clergyman loyal to Karekin and critic

In a statement issued on December 3, 27 of them condemned the 11 other bishops’ government-backed revolt against Karekin.

The number two figure in the church hierarchy, the Lebanon-based Catholicos Aram I of the Great House of Cilicia, on Monday, December 8, similarly denounced the Armenian government’s “unconstitutional and unacceptable” campaign, saying that it could “lead not only the church but also the nation and the country to self-destruction.”

Exploring National Security Dimension of AI in Armenia

AI, from page 1

“Armenia was not able to import these kinds of goods [GPU chips] from the US before and now we have a very interesting dynamic,” said Leonid Nersisyan, a defense analyst and research fellow at APRI Armenia. Developing AI capabilities is “kind of defending Armenia from being in such a weak position, such as it was after 2020.”

Nersisyan was referring to the year Armenia experienced an overwhelming defeat against Azerbaijan during the first phase of the Second Karabakh War. The Armenian military proved no match for an upgraded Azerbaijani force, which employed drones to great effect for the first time in the annals of global warfare.

In pivoting to AI, Armenia is striving to take advantage of its strong educational tradition in such areas as mathematics and engineering. The country is also seeking to tap into diaspora expertise. Today, global firms like Nvidia, Cisco, Adobe, Synopsys and many more have operations in Yerevan.

With limited natural resources, the country’s investors and educators have increasingly turned to tech as a driver of growth and global integration, and the sector now includes more than 1,200 tech companies with a combined annual turnover of more than \$2 billion, according to local nonprofit Bootcamps.

“The larger the economy you have, the more you can invest in your armed forces,” Nersisyan said. “The [Nvidia deal] actual-

ly opens the door for other deals, so local companies may be interested in having more advanced American technology for their products and that can also have some extensions to defense technologies too.”

Armenia is signaling it is not rushing blindly into the AI field; officials are pursuing partnerships with a range of international players. In addition to the Nvidia chips for the planned data center, the country is exploring AI and innovation cooperation with China within the framework of their strategic partnership. In early 2025, the Ministry of High-Tech Industry also signed an agreement with France’s Mistral AI, Europe’s only serious challenger to US and Chinese AI giants.

Meanwhile, earlier this year SpaceX’s Starlink launched its services in Armenia. In a region where conflicts with Azerbaijan have repeatedly targeted communication lines, satellite Internet is not just a convenience, it is resilience.

While AI might provide a big boost for Armenia’s defense capabilities, regional observers generally agree Armenia’s national interests are best served by focusing on developing trade possibilities, not striving to achieve strategic parity with long-time enemy Azerbaijan in the hopes of recovering Karabakh.

“Armenia is not in a position to compensate for the large capacity gap between itself and Azerbaijan – which should not just be seen in isolation, because Azerbaijan in practice has access to the technological capability of the Turkish military as well,”

Svante E. Cornell, the Director of the Institute for Security and Development Policy, told Eurasianet.

Given the provisional peace deal signed in August between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Cornell indicated that Russia now is Armenia’s main security threat. “The best course of action is to work for the rapid opening of trade routes, which would boost Armenia’s economy and its ability to strengthen its independence versus Russian continued influence in the country,” he said

Considering the current strategic balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, AI is unlikely a game-changer in the defense realm.

“Azerbaijan’s advantage comes from years of investment in drones, precision weapons and close cooperation with Turkey and Israel,” said Zaur Shiriyev, a non-resident scholar at the Berlin-based Carnegie Russia EurasiaCenter. “Advanced chips do not turn into weapons on their own, and they do not replace procurement, training, alliances or the broader strategic environment.”

“Where the new [AI-driven] infrastructure can help is in civilian resilience. It can improve cybersecurity, strengthen the protection of critical infrastructure and support more efficient public services,” Shiriyev continued. “These benefits contribute to overall stability, but they should not be confused with changes in military power.”

(Irakli Machaidze is a contributing writer covering the South Caucasus for www.eurasianet.org, where this story originally ran on December 5.)

Pashinyan Proposes Playing National Anthem Before Armenian Liturgies

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On the morning of December 8, he followed up with a short video during which he discussed his reasoning further, pointing to a specific passage in the liturgical text.

“There is such a passage in the text of the liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and with it the priests, in fact, start the liturgy: ‘O Council, deep, inaccessible, without beginning, who adorned your upper state, the order of the fiery ones, in the veil of unapproachable light, with unsurpassed glory.’ In other words, we are talking about the upper state, about the state. And the sounding of the national anthem before the liturgy will establish the connection between the upper and inner states,” Pashinyan argued.

He added that the presence of the Armenian state flag at the entrance or inside churches should also be discussed, noting it was an “accepted practice” in a number of other countries.

In recent weeks, Pashinyan has been attending services every Sunday across Armenia, as well as frequently sharing Psalms on social media and emphasizing Christian ethics in public.

On Sunday, Parliamentary Speaker Alen Simonyan spoke to journalists in Gyumri about the situation, claiming that there was only one solution to the conflict between the government and the Church.

“That solution is inevitable. The problem today is that Ktrich Nersisyan [Catholicos Karekin II] does not understand that with his behavior he is causing great harm to the Armenian Apostolic Church and the state, trying to fight against the inevitable,” Simonyan said.

He also suggested that the next liturgy should be held in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

“This is my personal opinion, I don’t know what the Prime Minister thinks about it, but I think he came to spend his time there,” Simonyan said.

On December 5, another high-ranking member of the clergy — Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan — was detained amidst the escalating rift between the Church and the government. Khachatryan is accused of arranging the planting of drugs in the backpack of a demonstrator at a 2018 protest against Karekin II.

The detentions began in October, when Armenia’s security services raided several diocesan offices and detained over a dozen clerics, including Bishop Mkrtich Proshyan, a cousin of the Catholicos, on charges of inciting unrest. Those arrests, too, were condemned by the church as state intimidation.

The Catholicosate has repeatedly accused Pashinyan’s administration of encroaching on its independence and using state agencies to undermine it. Pashinyan, for his part, has accused church officials of meddling in politics, aligning with opposition forces, and threatening the country’s stability.

(This story originally appeared on the website www.oc-media.org on December 8.)



ARMENIA

FightLife Heals Armenia's Disenchanted Youth With Sports and Christian Values

By Jackie Abramian

In 2020, the Republic of Azerbaijan unleashed a 44-day war—with Turkey's full military support and Israeli armament—against the indigenous Christian Armenian population in its disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian). Over 5,000 Armenians were killed, and thousands were injured and displaced. With countless families devastated by the loss of livelihoods and loved ones, many Artsakh Armenians fled to neighboring Armenia, creating a wave of disenfranchised and disillusioned youth who had lost family members and hope for the future.

"The inspiration for FightLife came from a deep recognition of the extent to which Armenia's youth desperately needed a positive, healing space in the aftermath of the devastating 44-day war in 2020. Many young people were struggling with trauma, loss of loved ones, lack of direction, and limited opportunities available to them outside of the country's capital. The gym was founded not only as a sports center, but as a place of character building and moral grounding with a mission to provide young people a safe place to channel their energy, and realize their future potential," said 32-year-old founder of the FightLife International Christian sports movement, Georg Ayvazyan. FightLife International is a partner with Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA).

What began as a single FightLife gym in Armenia's northern frontier, and the third-largest city of Vanadzor, has multiplied into four gyms (with more underway) — three in Armenia and one in Lebanon. FightLife's Lebanon branch engages the Armenian diaspora youth, "strengthening cultural and spiritual ties across borders," said Ayvazyan.

Some 300 youth athletes ages 5 to 18 are trained by 13 coaches whose athletic and academic backgrounds include sports science, boxing and martial arts. Several trainers hail from a cadre of former national-level competitive athletes, while others hold degrees in physical education.

FightLife athletes have achieved top recognitions at national and international competitions, for their skills and athletic discipline. At the national Mix Fight championships they earned top scores against Armenia's best young fighters. Internationally, at the IMAFF Abu Dhabi Youth World Championship 2025 and the GAMMA tournaments in neighboring Georgia, they advanced to the Budosan World Cup in Russia, where their performance matched top international athletes.

"Several of our youth have earned podium finishes and medals, proving that world-class talent can grow out of small, community-driven programs," Ayvazyan said proudly.

Lacking local or federal government funding, FightLife relies on the monthly membership of \$26 and additional contributions from donors. Its annual operating budget of nearly \$94,000 barely covers rental fees for the four gyms' equipment and maintenance, coaching salaries, and other operating expenses. Private donations and community support supplement the trainers' modest salaries. Prioritizing sustainability and accessibility over profits, FightLife ensures accessibility for all youth regardless of their financial standing. No one is "turned away due to financial hard-

ship," underscores Ayvazyan.

"Given the scale of impact, this remains a lean operation, heavily reliant on donations and voluntary support," Ayvazyan said.

A Faith-Based Sports Sanctuary

As the first nation to accept Christianity as a state religion in AD 301, the Christian faith has been front and center, and integral to the national identity of the Armenians. This faith was further cemented for the survivors of the Ottoman Empire perpetrated Genocide of 1915, during which 1.5 million of the three million Armenian population was massacred. It's the last century's first, fully documented, yet least recognized Genocide.

Grounded in Christian values, FightLife's daily training interlinks faith with a focus on "perseverance, humility, and respect for others." Providing athletes and their families a "strong moral compass," it reinforces discipline, while centering the youth "away from crime, addiction,

stronger, and carry the memory of my father as a motivation. For me, FightLife is a second family and the path toward reaching my dreams," said Bagiyants.

A Ray of Hope Amidst Dire Social Challenges

Two of FightLife's three gyms in Armenia are in Vanadzor, a city of 100,000, and one of the country's most socially and economically challenged cities. Over the past five years, they city's crime rates have reached nearly 40 percent. Petty theft, substance abuse, and street violence disproportionately impact the young population, who face higher unemployment and limited access to constructive social outlets.

"FightLife offers an alternative path: a place where discipline and sport can counteract the exterior social pressures, transforming potential vulnerability into strength and leadership," explains Ayvazyan.

While most members at the Vanadzor

mother moved to Vanadzor when he was 3, having just lost his father in a car accident. With the city steeped in youth drug and alcohol addiction and street violence, Ayvazyan took up martial arts at age 13 for self-defense and to stay clear of the crime-ridden influences.

Following the 2020 war, Ayvazyan saw the younger generation's demise into the "darkness of addiction and street violence." Leading a team, he established the first "Christian martial arts gym" in Vanadzor, naming it FightLife. It provided the youth training and guidance for a healthier lifestyle, away from addiction and violence—forces which Ayvazyan withstood as a youth.

Ayvazyan is also the father to two daughters and an 11-year-old son who is a mixed martial arts fighter at the FightLife Vanadzor gym. He proudly recounted his team's faith-based sportsmanship at a recent international competition when a FightLife athlete defeated his Azerbaijani opponent and celebrated the win without too much fanfare. When Ayvazyan noticed the young Azerbaijani fighter's coach harshly reprimanding him for losing the match, he approached the young athlete, and extending "a true spirit of sportsmanship" assured him of future victories.

"In choosing compassion, we demonstrated that even in the midst of national conflict, humanity and respect must prevail," said Ayvazyan.

With emphasis on "Sport, Nation and Faith," Ayvazyan hopes 10 additional FightLife gyms will soon sprout across rural regions "where youth lack spiritual direction and safe, structured environments."

"Greater participation in international competitions will give young athletes the exposure and experience needed to elevate their careers and demonstrate the unbreakable spirit of the Armenian people. At its core, FightLife is not simply a set of gyms — it is a movement that provides young Armenians the tools to overcome trauma, build character, and find hope amidst difficulties. Every punch, every training session, every victory in the ring carries a larger meaning: that strength, when guided by faith and respect, can transform lives and communities," Ayvazyan cited the transformational powers of FightLife in Erik Evoyan's life.

Following his army service completion, Evoyan got involved in alcohol abuse and destructive behaviors to cope with his trauma as a veteran. Finding the FightLife community gave him a fresh start, a new direction with intense discipline, training, a newly discovered faith in God, and unconditional support from the FightLife community. Replacing alcoholism with boxing, Evoyan reinvented his lifestyle, and focusing on perseverance, earned the 2024 and 2025 Suzuki Boxing Championship in Poland.

"No matter how dark your past, there is always a way forward through hard work, discipline, and faith," said the twenty-four-year-old Evoyan, now one of FightLife's inspiring coaches who shares his story of resilience, motivating other young athletes.

(This article originally ran in euronews-week.co.uk in November. Jackie Abramian is committed to amplifying the work of women peace-builders, change makers and social entrepreneurs. She is a social enterprise advisor and the founder of Global Cadence consultancy.)



FightLife training seminar organized with FCA, led by Christian champion Nate Marquardt, was held in Yerevan's Olimpavan gym

and hopelessness." Ayvazyan believes the faith-based training empowers the youth to accomplish and reach their potential regardless of challenges faced.

"Our Christian principles — of respect, forgiveness, and service to others — are the foundations of our community, where athletes feel supported not only physically but spiritually. Families are reassured by knowing their children are in a safe environment where faith is as central as fitness. This framework has helped parents see FightLife as more than a gym; it is a trusted institution shaping future leaders with discipline, compassion, and resilience," said Ayvazyan.

As a sanctuary, FightLife is a healing outreach to those traumatized by the grave losses during the 2020 war, and Azerbaijan's consequent ethnic cleansing in 2023, which forcibly displaced over 120,000 indigenous Armenians from their ancestral homeland. The displaced refugees were resettled across neighboring Armenia and other countries. Fifteen-year-old Erik Bagiyants' displaced family settled in the city of Vanadzor. One of eight children, Bagiyants, who lost his father in the 2020 war, found it challenging to be among strangers in Vanadzor. When he found FightLife's community, he found "strength and purpose" which encouraged his faith.

"I have chosen to fight harder, grow

gym are local youth, many travel long distances daily from the surrounding regions. Among them is fifteen-year-old Hamlet Darchinyan who travels 14 miles daily from his northern hometown of Spitak.

As the epicenter of the December 1988's 6.8 magnitude earthquake, Spitak, Armenia, was leveled into rubble. The 11,000-populated city still carries the traumas of the devastating aftermath of the most destructive earthquake in the Soviet Union's history, which left 25,000 dead, 20,000 injured, and half a million inhabitants in the region homeless.

"Hamlet's parents work as bakers in Russia and sacrifice a significant portion of their earnings to cover his daily taxi fees, so he can maintain his training. This sacrifice is worth it for his parents, who see FightLife's positive impact on their son's faith, character, discipline, and future," Ayvazyan said Hamlet's father didn't take his son to Russia seeing how FightLife's impact on his son's growth has made him "a stronger, better version of himself."

This March, FightLife opened a third gym in the northern rural village of Tsaghkahovit. With just over 2,000 in population, the village sits on the slopes of the 4090-meter-high Mount Aragats — the highest point in the Republic of Armenia.

Guided By Personal, Lived Challenges
Born in Russia, Georg Ayvazyan and his

Armenian Symphony Tours Germany

By Muriel Mirak-Weissbach
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

WIESBADEN, Germany — Music lovers in Wiesbaden greeted the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra with enthusiastic applause on November 27, when the renowned ensemble performed the tenth in a series of 15 concerts, on a whirlwind tour through the Federal Republic. Under the baton of conductor Sergey Smbatyan, the orchestra performed a short piece by Alexander Artunian, followed by two works by Pyotr Tchaikovsky for piano and orchestra, with virtuoso Olga Scheps at the keyboard.

Beginning on November 16 in Göppingen, the musicians played in large cities like Mannheim, Dortmund, Nuremberg, Cologne, and Essen, as well as smaller cities, Kempton, Erkelenz, and Vilbel. Their programs were varied, as were the soloists; in addition to Olga Scheps, pianist Vladimir Aćimović performed in some concerts; Darius Preuss on the violin and Raphaela

trayed through musical images that combine the wintry atmosphere with romantic harmonies. The audience responded with thunderous applause, which led conductor Smbatyan to offer as an encore, a Khachaturyan waltz. His playful mode of conducting this, at times allowing the musicians to play without direction, brought rapturous applause again from the grateful Wiesbaden music lovers.

Musicians as Performers and Educators

The orchestra, conductor Smbatyan, and pianist Scheps are world class musicians. The Armenian State Symphony Orchestra was created by Smbatyan, who is currently artistic director and principal conductor. Committed to the idea of the unifying power of music, Smbatyan founded the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia (SYOA), at the age of 18. That ensemble, which performed in prominent international festivals, was the precursor to today's symphony orchestra. Those who joined the ASSO were

among teenagers in Armenia. (DasA – the name: Das means lesson in Armenian, and A is the La note of the musical scale, the beginning of the “musical alphabet.”) The exciting project launched by Smbatyan and the orchestra in 2018, offers music lessons and extracurricular meetings to high school students, to acquaint them with classical music and the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional joy it provides. Since its inception DasA has given lessons to 67,000 students in 173 public schools in Armenia, and the orchestra has observed an increase of 30-40 percent more youngsters in their concert audiences.

Smbatyan himself is well known in Armenia and abroad, and has been honored with several awards; in 1916, then-RA President Serzh Sargsyan named him “Honored Artist of the Republic of Armenia,” and a year later the Yerevan Mayor presented him with a Gold Medal. In 2015, he had received the “Order of Arts and Letters of France” granted by the Minister of Culture and Communication of France.

Born in 1987 in Yerevan, into a family of musicians, he started playing the violin with his grandmother, then studied with renowned violinists Bagrat Vardanyan and Zakhar Bron. In 2009, he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory and the Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory, and received his Ph.D. in Fine Arts from the Institute of Arts, a division of the Armenian National Academy of Sciences. In 2012, he graduated from the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Music as a Unifying Force

Smbatyan's musical activities have embraced important social and political themes. In September 2016, in a project of his own, he conducted the inaugural concert of the All Armenian Choir and Orchestra “Generation of Independence.” There were 1144 Armenian musicians from different regions of Armenia and Artsakh who performed together. And in 2015, the centennial of the Armenian genocide, he founded the 24/04 World Orchestra for Peace in 2015, and 2 years later, the Pan-Armenian Symphony Orchestra. Smbatyan has also supported charitable projects, spreading music in nursing homes, orphanages, and universities throughout Armenia.

Olga Scheps, born in Moscow, came to Germany as a child and is a German citizen. Like Smbatyan, she grew up in a musical family, and started piano lessons at the age of four. She gave her first concerts as a youngster, and soon won prizes at German competitions for young musicians in 1999 and 2001. Since then she has performed worldwide, playing with leading orchestras and in music festivals throughout Germany.



Sergey Smbatyan and the members of the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra

Gromes on the cello were two further soloists. Accordingly, some concerts featured a violin concerto by Aram Khachaturian, or a cello concerto by Edward Elgar. In all the concerts, Tchaikovsky concertos and symphonies were featured, with cello, violin, or piano. It was an ambitious project!

In Wiesbaden, their program began with Tonakan naxergank (Festive Overture for Symphony Orchestra) by Alexander Artunian, followed by Tchaikovsky's Piano concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, Op. 23. After the intermission, the orchestra presented Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.1 in G minor, Op. 13, Winter Daydreams.

The concert hall was transformed into “a venue for musical magic,” as a pre-view put it. And soloist Scheps confirmed it in her performance of the well-known and extremely moving piano concerto. Tchaikovsky's symphony, which concluded the program, developed the magical quality of the Winter Daydreams, por-

young and talented musicians united by a commitment to enhance cultural awareness in Armenia and share the uplifting power of classical music, with a vast and varied repertoire. The orchestra performs more than 50 concerts a year, in cooperation with a large number of world class artists. It has played in major concert halls in Paris, Berlin, Moscow, The Hague, Brussels, Hamburg, and Madrid. In 2020, the orchestra toured Europe with violin virtuoso and Artist-in-Residence Maxim Vengerov, with outstanding performances hosted on renowned stages.

Equally important as its concert activities, and crucial to guaranteeing continuity and development of classical music performance, the orchestra and conductor Smbatyan have devoted major efforts to educating the younger generation of Armenians. In the framework of the DasA educational-cultural project, they have been generating interest in classical music

Turkey Puts Journalist on Trial over Article on Armenian Genocide

ISTANBUL (SCF) — Journalist Tuğçe Yılmaz, editor of the Bianet news website, appeared in an İstanbul court on December 2 on charges of “insulting the Turkish nation and the Republic of Turkey,” in an article featuring interviews with Armenian youths who refer to the mass killing of Armenians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire as genocide.

The charges stem from Yılmaz's article, “Armenian Youth in Turkey Speak: Mourning That Has Lasted 109 Years,” published on April 24, 2024. The article was referred to authorities through a complaint filed via the Presidential Communication Center (CİMER), according to the Agos newspaper.

The first hearing at the İstanbul 2nd Criminal Court of First Instance drew a

large group of observers, including representatives from Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA) and the Turkish Journalists' Union (TGS). The next hearing is scheduled for April 21, 2026.

Yılmaz told the court she believed the complaint came from someone with biased views on a historically contentious topic such as the Armenian genocide, warning that prosecuting her in a period of dialogue with Armenia sends a chilling message to the press.

Her lawyers argued that the CİMER complaint lacked a legal basis to justify a prosecution, calling the case an instance of judicial harassment of a journalist. They said references to the Armenian genocide

fall under protected speech, citing rulings by Turkey's Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights.

Yılmaz was taken to a police station on June 3 to provide a statement and testified before a prosecutor the following day, saying her article merely relayed the views of those she interviewed and denying any wrongdoing.

Turkish courts have previously ruled that using the term “Armenian genocide” falls within the scope of free expression. On July 2, 2024, journalists Haluk Kalafat and Elif Akgül were acquitted of similar charges of “publicly insulting the Turkish nation” over six Bianet articles published between 2015 and 2019.

(This article originally appeared on www.stockholmcf.org on December 3.)

INTERNATIONAL

Malkhas Amoyan Among Contenders for 2025 Best Wrestler

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — The United World Wrestling (UWW) has announced the shortlist of contenders for the 2025 Greco-Roman Wrestler of the Year.

The nominees include Malkhas Amoyan (77 kg), a Paris Olympics bronze medalist, two-time world champion and four-time European champion.

Iranian wrestlers Mohammadhadi Saravi, Saeed Esmaili, Gholamreza Farokhi and Uzbek wrestler Aytjan Khalmakhanov are also among the contenders.

US Envoy Links Peace Deal to Armenia–Turkey Border Opening

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Tom Barrack, US Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy on Syria, this week stated that a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia could create hope for the reopening of the Armenia–Turkey border, as reported by RFE/RL.

Barrack emphasized Turkey's strategic role in the South Caucasus, saying it is vital for both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“If we expand the corridor from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean, it will allow us to solve all regional energy issues,” he noted.

Georgia Waives Fee on First Azerbaijani Oil Shipment to Armenia

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Georgia's Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development announced on December 8 that it will not charge transit fees for the first shipment of Azerbaijani oil products to Armenia. The move is described as a one-time decision.

Earlier, Azerbaijani media reported that Georgia had allegedly demanded \$92 per ton for allowing oil to transit to Armenia, according to Sputnik Armenia.

“On December 5, the Government of Georgia received a request from partners regarding a one-time transit of fuel from Azerbaijan to Armenia via Georgian territory. By decision of Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Railway has been instructed to carry out this shipment free of charge,” the statement said.

The ministry emphasized that Georgia remains a reliable and strategic partner for both Armenia and Azerbaijan and continues to support regional peace and stability.

Earlier, during a forum in Doha, Hikmet Hajiyev, foreign policy advisor to Azerbaijan's president, stated that Baku and Yerevan are discussing potential exports of oil and oil products from Azerbaijan to Armenia.

On November 28, Armenia's Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan attended the 12th meeting of the border delimitation commissions in Gabala. However, neither side reported that topics beyond border issues had been discussed.

INTERNATIONAL

Syunik's Iranian Consulate General Celebrates Third Anniversary, Cementing Armenian-Iranian Relations

IRAN, from page 1

After her statement, a six-minute film was shown depicting the activities of the consulate general, which can also be viewed on Facebook (www.facebook.com/reel/1537956357645229).

Acting Iranian Amb. Bahram Taheri, speaking in Persian, with Avedian translating, praised the activities of the consulate general. He stressed that Armenians and Persians have enjoyed over two thousand years of relations, which have been neighborly through good times and bad. In fact, he said that the relations between the two

would be built in the near future. Meanwhile, the work conducted by Iranian technical and engineering companies on roadways in Armenia, Taheri said, approaches the value of \$700 million. A 32-km-section of the North-South Highway between Agarak and Kajaran is in the course of rapid construction by them, he said, and the tunnel being completed near Kajaran will make the connection between the two countries easier.

Taheri said that work on a third electrical power line between the two countries has been rapid over the last 2-3 years and is largely completed.

He said that there were too many cultural and educational exchanges for him to talk about, so he only mentioned two notable events: the Navasard Armenian-Iranian cultural and culinary festival (which took place for the fourth year in Sisian in Syunik province in August) and the Armenian National Philharmonic Orchestra's concert in the historic site of Persepolis, Iran, in September of this year.

Taheri declared the Islamic Republic of Iran has always worked for the establishment of a lasting and real peace between the Armenian and Azerbaijani republics and that the issues of the region must be solved

by the countries of the region in regional formats without outside intervention. He emphasized that Iran would not tolerate the presence of external forces in the region and that the republics of Iran and Armenia are fully capable of securing the safety of all their borders.

"Syunik Province is an inseparable and invincible part of the Republic of Armenia," he stressed, with a special significance for Iran as the gateway for Iran to Armenia and even to the markets of Europe. Of course, he added, for Armenia it is the gateway to Iran and south and southeastern Asia.

Next, Syunik Governor Robert Ghukasyan was invited to speak and he expressed thanks (in Armenian) for all the

work of the consulate, stating that Iran and Armenia are good neighbors, working side by side. He noted in particular that it was thanks to the activities of the consulate general that the introduction of Persian language classes in all schools in Syunik was being considered.

Iranian Consul General Morteza Abedin Varamin then spoke in Persian, translated by Avedian. He declared that three years passed by very quickly and though much has been done, there is still more to be accomplished. One piece of good news he stated was that Armenian citizens will be able to go to Iran with their own cars.

Several students from Kapan State College of the Arts gave a performance with traditional instruments as part of a musical interlude, after which framed certificates of appreciation were distributed to a large number of Armenian government officials and leaders of various cultural, medical and sports institutions in the audience.

At the end of this process, Avedian declared on behalf of the staff of the consulate general their appreciation of Varamin, who even risked his life at times during his period of service. Fr. Avatik Martirosyan of Vahanavank Monastery in Syunik was asked to present him with a souvenir plate from Syunik. Martirosyan conveyed the blessings of Bishop Makar Hakobyan, Primate of the Diocese of Syunik, before expressing his own wishes.

After the reception, each guest received a present of a framed ceramic square tile bearing the images of the local Mt. Khustup and Mt. Damavand (the highest peak in Iran, located about 50 km. northeast of Tehran).

Varamin Interview

In a brief interview with the Mirror-Spectator in English after most guests left the event, Varamin explained that few Iranians actually live in Syunik Province. It was basically a transit route for both Iranians and Armenians. He said that every day between 500 to 900 Armenians travel to Iran, not just from Meghri or other cities in Syunik but even from Yerevan. Some just cross the border, buy some things and come back, whereas others go further to cities like Julfa, Tabriz or even Tehran, he said.

Iranians who come to Armenia as tourists often come for holidays like New Year or Vardavar. In the summer, he said, hundreds and even thousands of Iranians might come. He recalled one day when 40 buses of Iranian tourists came to Armenia.

Meanwhile, he said that around 500 trucks each day cross the borders of both countries. One of the primary duties of the consulate general, as noted during the event, is to help with the issues of their drivers, whether accidents, repairs, or other personal issues. Varamin also said that sometimes if something happens to Armenians in Iran, the consulate general would try to help them too.

He said that if you ask Iranians in Iran, they will say that Armenians, especially those living in Iran, are very good and honest people. He then mentioned the prominent poet Parvin Etesami (1907-1941) of Tabriz, Iran, who had written a famous poem about Armenians. This poem was recited by the Iranian ambassador when President Pezeshkian had visited Armenia.

Varamin suggested looking up the translation of the poem. It turns out that the poem states that a preacher asks his son what makes a person a Muslim. He answers, honesty and not harming but helping

people. The preacher then says that therefore in their city there was only one Muslim and he was an Armenian (Christian).

Varamin said, "We are proud of having such a minority in Iran as our citizens, Iranian citizens."



Consul General of the Islamic Republic of Iran Morteza Abedin Varamin (photo Aram Arkun)

nian citizens."

Varamin said that aside from Kapan, the consulate general does work in other cities of Syunik. It organized one festival in Goris, the second largest city in Syunik, while a sister city relationship was signed this year between Goris and the Iranian city of Nain, which is in Isfahan province. Furthermore, he said work is underway to arrange a sister city in Iran for Sisian in Syunik Province.

When asked when the second bridge over the Arax River might be built, Varamin said that if it were up to him, he would do it today, or at least this year. When pressed, he said he thought it would be built at the latest next year.

Varamin has been to Yerevan and other parts of Armenia outside of Syunik. Having lived in Kapan for three years, he said that it's unique and the people are very nice. He said, "I feel the culture is closer to that of Iran." He said there are some expressions used like "jigar jan," an expression of endearment literally translated as "liver soul," which are similar to that Iranians use, and in general there are similar approaches to life, so that Iranians can feel very comfortable in Kapan.

Varamin said that his appointment as consul general continues until the first of the Iranian New Year, and after that the Iranian government must decide whether to prolong it.

Varamin had a specific message for Armenians living in the US, which he said was on his mind for months now. He said it was his desire to bring Armenian Americans to Armenia and then from Armenia to Iran, where they could visit the Armenian monasteries of St. Thaddeus (Sourp Tadeos) and St. Stepanos in northwestern Iran, and if they want, go deeper into Iran. He said, "I think Armenians can — not just in the US but all over the world — play a very important role in improving relations between Iran and other countries. I don't talk about governments but people."

He said that short trips can be arranged to religious and other important places for Armenians not only from the US but also in France, Russia and other countries, and perhaps he would accompany them for the first trip. "By this," he said, "we can somehow help the world be in peace."



A commemorative ceramic tile depicting the Armenian Mt. Khustup and Iranian Mt. Damavand together was given to guests (photo Aram Arkun)

countries are so strong that no third party can come between them.

Taheri said that the visit of Iran's president, Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian, to Armenia in August 2025 was transformational for relations between the two countries. Trade between the two countries is important. This year it is estimated that it will exceed \$900 million and hoped it will reach \$1 billion [in 2024 it was \$737 million], but Taheri said that taking into consideration the \$3 billion trade target of the two countries' leaders, various obstacles to trade must be overcome.

The bridge over the Arax River connecting the two countries is not sufficient, he said, so it is foreseen that a second bridge



The courtyard of the Iranian Consulate General seen from outside (photo Aram Arkun)



Community News

ANCA Condemns Reckless Trump Pardon of Corrupt Rep. Cuellar

WASHINGTON — The Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) condemned President Trump’s pardon of Congressman Henry Cuellar (D-TX), who was indicted in 2024 for accepting nearly six hundred thousand dollars in Azerbaijani bribes in exchange for advancing Azerbaijan’s interests in Congress at the direct expense of the Constitutional rights of Armenian Americans.

“Trump’s pardon of Congressman Cuellar is a free pass for foreign bribes, a billboard atop the White House announcing to the world that it’s pay-to-play in Washington,” said ANCA Executive Director Aram Hamparian. “It’s Azerbaijan First foreign policy, at the expense of the American people.”

On December 3, President Trump announced on Truth Social his “full and unconditional PARDON” of Cuellar and his wife, Imelda. In his post, Trump characterized the federal indictment as political persecution, claiming that “Crooked Joe used the



Rep. Henry Cuellar

FBI and DOJ to ‘take out’ a member of his own Party after Highly Respected Congressman Henry Cuellar bravely spoke out against Open Borders.” Trump made no mention of the detailed evidence presented in the Justice Department’s indictment documenting years of corrupt payments from Azerbaijan’s state-controlled oil company in exchange for legislative favors.

The ANCA is continuing its call on the U.S. House of Representatives to expel Henry Cuellar, condemn Azerbaijan’s brazen interference in American democracy, and enact statutory measures to prevent ongoing attempts by Azerbaijan’s corrupt Aliyev regime to rig U.S. foreign policy in its favor. To contact Congress, visit anca.org/expel

“President Trump’s reckless pardon underscores the importance of investigating Azerbaijan’s foreign influence operations in Washington, DC,” said Hamparian. “Cuellar’s crimes — a serious as they are — represent the tip of the iceberg. Congress needs to expel him immediately and root out Baku’s bribery schemes across our government.”

see CUELLAR, page 9



Tom Vartanian and his grandson

Funding Hope by Playing Ball

By Kristin Johnson

MCLEAN, Va. (Fairfax County Times) — For the past 35 years, McLean resident Tom Vartanian has played senior baseball for a cause. Before this year, that cause was the Special Olympics. This year, the 76-year-old has created a non-profit that is closer to his heart. Play Ball for Peyton’s Pals is Vartanian’s fundraising initiative to raise money for rare disease research and programs at Johns Hopkins Children’s Center in Baltimore.

Earlier this year, Vartanian’s two-year-old grandson, Peyton, was hospitalized for a week at Inova Fairfax. Peyton’s initial diagnosis came in March. A more detailed diagnosis, a rare endocrine condition that will require lifelong monitoring, took months.

“I don’t know that people understand the unbearable pain of dealing with an infant or a toddler who has a life-altering condition. It is sort of beyond imagination until you’re there,” said Vartanian. “There are a lot of children that they treat that can’t afford the kinds of services and programs that you need to both deal with the child and deal with the caregivers and the family.”

It had become clear to Vartanian, his wife Karen, and their family that Peyton’s journey would be a long-term process. He realized that what most people in situations like this need is hope.

“It’s very difficult to get through the days without hope. And the way you give yourself hope and the way you give others hope is by doing something about it and, you know, taking some action, whether it’s effective or not,” said Vartanian. “In my case, this is the action.”

Vartanian shared his fundraising idea with Allie Boge, associate director of development at Johns Hopkins Children’s Center. When she asked him what his target goal was, she was astounded when he answered, \$25,000 or \$30,000.

“I think what’s really neat is that Tom, when we first started talking, he said, you know, I want to help my grandson, but I realize my grandson’s not the only one who is up against these challenges. So I want to help other kids like him,” said Boge.

She added that philanthropic funding is more critical now than ever, especially for rare disease research projects. Private funding helps empower scientists to use their skills, knowledge, and talents to find cures and treatments for patients at their children’s center.

Vartanian’s initial goals were low. To date, he has raised about \$47,000 to support Johns Hopkins Children’s Center, \$45,000 of that came in before he even played an inning of ball.

As of November 17, Vartanian had already played 77 innings. So far, his stats are great. After nine games in Phoenix, Ariz., and Fort Myers, Fla., his team, The

see VARTANIAN, page 11

Human Rights Attorney Lenna Hovanessian is Running for Clark County Commission

LAS VEGAS — On Wednesday, December 3, community advocate and human rights attorney Lenna Hovanessian announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for Clark County Commission District F. Hovanessian announced her candidacy after witnessing the struggles of everyday Nevadans facing unaffordability, the high cost of living, exorbitant housing rental and sale prices, and lack of job growth opportunities.

“At a time when too many Nevadans are struggling to find job opportunities, being priced out of their homes and struggling to get by, we need to enact policies that will directly improve affordability for Nevada families and build a brighter future,” said Lenna Hovanessian. “No Nevadans should be priced out of their community or denied their opportunity at success - we need leaders who fight for policies, job opportunities and infrastructure that benefit every Nevadan. As a Commissioner, I plan to invest in public school education, build more housing, improve healthcare and create the new jobs that Nevada families critically need. I am running to be a champion for Nevada families on the Clark County Commission.”

Hovanessian came to America as a young child, fleeing a civil war that ripped her country apart and killed thousands of innocent civilians. She was determined to honor the sacrifices her parents made to take her to safety and start a new life, so Lenna committed herself to education. She earned her undergraduate degree from UCLA and entered Southwestern Law School inspired to fight the injustice, corruption and destruction that she witnessed in her youth.

For more than 20 years, Lenna has called Las Vegas home, raising her children here alongside her husband, Dr. Armen Hovanessian. Over the past decade, she has led state-wide efforts to improve the public school curriculum and co-drafted Nevada’s Holocaust and Armenian Genocide Education Bill, which became law in 2021. She has also worked at the federal level with Congressional leaders- including Representative Dina Titus—on drafting federal sanctions legislation addressing war crimes and political hostages.

Lenna has advocated for more resources for students and teachers, and the need to hold CCSD accountable for the educational commitments they have made to families. Lenna is running for Clark County Commission because she has seen how Southern Nevada families are struggling with affordability and housing costs. She knows how high the grocery bills have risen, how hard it is to find a home you can afford to rent or buy, and how tough it has become to find a job. As a County Commissioner, she believes we need to fight for our community and deliver lower costs and more opportunities for families so that every Nevadan can have a better quality of life and a shot at the American Dream.



OBITUARY

Rev. Dr. Zaven Arzoumanian (1933-2025)

Longtime Pastor in Western Diocese

GLENDAL, Calif. — The Rev. Dr. Zaven Avak Kahana Arzoumanian died on December 4, 2025. He was 92.

Fr. Zaven was a unique and remarkable servant of the Armenian Church, serving as a priest for some 70 years, with more than 40 of those in the Western Diocese. In addition to his pastoral service, Fr. Zaven served on the Diocesan Council, and was a member of the Diocesan Unity Committee.

His ministry had many facets. He was in his natural element in the social setting of parish life. But he was equally at home in the quiet vocation of scholarship. Through a lifetime of study, he became deeply knowledgeable about the Armenian Christian heritage, approaching its holy tradition with reverence and humility; treating it as a precious treasure. Most of all, he sought to share that treasure with others who would benefit from its ageless wisdom.

In his generation, Fr. Zaven was one of a handful of learned people who could express the church's ancient teachings in the language of the modern world. His continuation of Patriarch Ormanian's Azgapatum — the definitive work on the history of the Armenian Church — was a tremendous undertaking, which will be viewed with admiration and gratitude by future generations of Armenian Christians.

His family originated in Everek (near Kayseri) in historic Armenia; but his father Yeghia was forced to flee that city, and arrived in Cairo in 1922, where he opened a tailor shop. Yeghia Arzoumanian married

Serpouhi Nishanian, and the couple had six children. Decades later, Fr. Zaven would point to the dozens of descendants of that family as proof that the Genocide planners had failed in their murderous intentions.

Fr. Arzoumanian was born in 1933, and baptized with the name Taniel. He went to Cairo's Kalustian National School, learning four languages. His grandfather Hagop (author of the 1935 History of Everek) would take him to church on Sundays. Young Taniel saw his mother's brother ordained as a priest in 1945; and in 1949, at the age of 16, he was himself accepted at the seminary of the Catholicate of Cilicia. As a student in the Faculty of Theology, Taniel had an opportunity to meet some of the intellectual luminaries of the Armenian world, including Catholicos of Cilicia Karekin Hovsepian and writer Arshag Tchobanian.

In 1954, he was ordained a celibate priest, and given the priestly name Zaven. From this time, he became a witness to events that shaped the Armenian Church in the latter half of the 20th century (including the contested election of the Catholicos of Cilicia in 1956); Fr. Arzoumanian would later draw on these experiences, and his own historical research, for his voluminous continuation of Archbishop Malachia Ormanian's Azgapatum.

In pursuit of education he traveled to Europe and America, studying at the University of London, and later at Columbia University (where he received his doctorate in Armenian history in 1983 with his translation of the History of Ghevond the

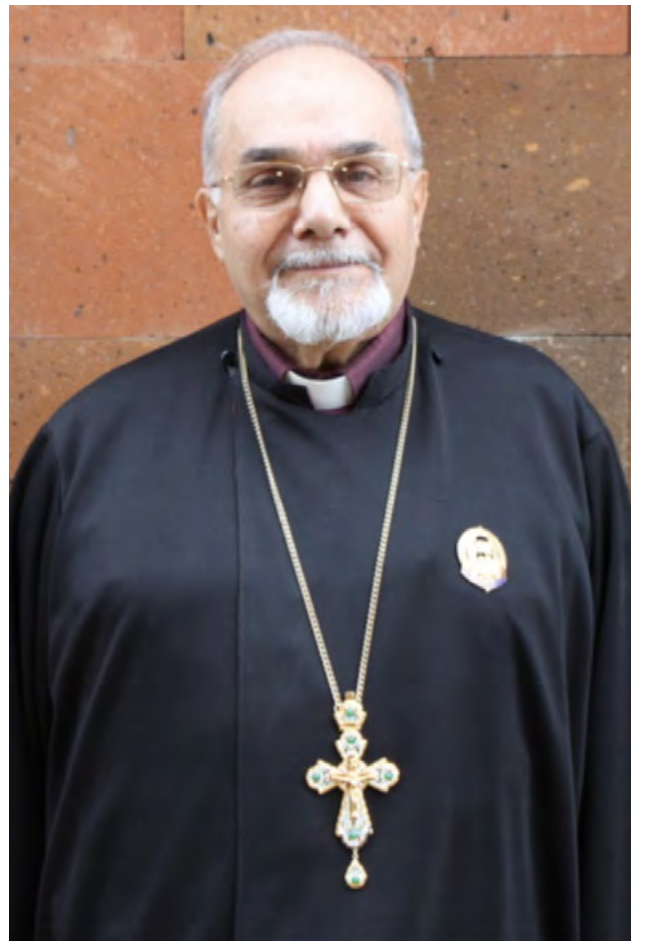
Eminent Vardapet).

Fr. Arzoumanian's pastoral service began among the Armenian community of Ethiopia (1957-1959), and continued in the United States. For some 20 years, he served the Eastern Diocese as a pastor in Philadelphia, PA: first at Holy Trinity Church in Cheltenham, and then at St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Church in Wynnewood.

In 1984, Fr. Zaven took on the pastorship of the Armenian Church community in Florida. He was instrumental in founding the state's first Armenian Church: St. David Church of Boca Raton. By this time, he had received dispensation to marry, and with Yeretzgin Joyce beside him Der Zaven devoted his energy to building the fledgling church into a vital member of our Diocesan family. Yeretzgin lent her talents to the parish choir and the Women's Guild, and received the affection of all through her kind and pious presence.

After Der Hayr's retirement in 2002, the Arzoumanians moved to California, where Fr. Zaven served the community of Pasadena for several years during the construction of that city's St. Gregory the Illuminator Church.

With the formal conclusion of his career as a parish priest, Fr. Zaven dedicated



himself to research, lecturing, and writing some 17 books—among them his 2017 memoir, *Reflections in Retrospect: Memoirs of a Pastor's Six Decades of Service*, published by the Western Diocese.

Fr. Zaven is survived by his wife Yn. Joyce; and by a large, intergenerational family of surviving siblings, nephews, and nieces.

Funeral services for Fr. Zaven will take place on Thursday, December 18 at St. Gregory Armenian Church in Pasadena.

Charles R. Kochakian

Engineer Devoted to Family, Church and Knights of Vartan

Charles R. Kochakian, 87, passed away on November 24, 2025, at his home, surrounded by his loving family. Charles was born in Salem, MA. After marrying the love of his life, Elizabeth, with whom he shared 63 wonderful years, the two of them made their home in Andover, MA, and spent their winters in Boca Raton, Fla.

Charlie graduated from Merrimack College with a B.S. in electrical engineering and later earned his M.S. in aeronautics and astronautics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He enjoyed a distinguished 40-year career at the Charles Stark Draper Laboratory in Cambridge, MA, where he served as program manager for the ICBM Guidance Programs and as chief of the Laboratory Instrument Evaluation Test Operations Division. His work contributed to all deployed strategic missile guidance systems for both the US Air Force and Navy. Throughout his career, he published numerous papers, received several awards, and worked alongside brilliant leaders in his field.

After retirement, Charlie was instrumental in establishing an RFID laboratory at Merrimack College in North Andover.

The college subsequently offered a course in radio frequency identification (RFID) technology, which he taught, training students in its applications. He was a lifelong member of AIAA and IEEE and a licensed Professional Engineer in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Charlie proudly served the United States in the National Guard.

He was a devoted lifelong member of the Armenian Church and a longtime member of Holy Cross Armenian Church in Lawrence, MA, where he served for many years on the Parish Council and as its chairman. He also served as a Diocesan delegate of the parish. In recent years, he was an active parishioner of St. Gregory's Armenian Church in North Andover, MA. For over 50 years, Charlie was a dedicated member of the Knights of Vartan Arakadz Lodge of the Merrimack Valley, where he served as both Commander and Advisor.

Charlie was an avid runner and golfer, and a devoted fan of all Boston sports teams — especially his beloved Boston Bruins and New England Patriots. A proud athlete himself, he played high school football for Salem, MA, where he served



as team captain. He cherished family vacations, particularly summers spent together on Cape Cod and in Maine. He loved tending to his yard and was known for his remarkable ability to fix anything. Charlie treasured being involved in his grandchildren's lives, never missing an opportunity to attend their sporting events and school activities. Always ready with guidance and support for his children, grandchildren, and anyone who needed him, he approached every problem with patience, meticulous care, and heartfelt understanding.

Charlie had deep confidence in his medical team at Dana-Farber — both in Boston and Methuen — as well as at the Lynn Cancer Institute in Boca Raton. He held great affection for the doctors, nurses and staff who cared for him, and they adored him in return. During his time in hospice care, the compassion and respect shown by the visiting nurses brought tremendous comfort to him and to his family. His loved ones remain profoundly grateful to all who supported and cared for him.

Family was the cornerstone of Charlie's life. He is survived by his devoted wife, Elizabeth, and their loving sons: Robert and his wife Susan of Salem, NH; James and his wife Michelle of Andover, MA, and Fort Myers, FL; and Stephen and his wife Kimberly of North Andover, MA. He was predeceased by his parents, Roopen and Mary Kochakian, and his brother, Robert V. Kochakian. He leaves behind his sister, Rosalind Malone, and her late husband, Edward, of Burlington, MA; his brother, Rev. Fr. Garabed Kochakian, and his wife, Roberta, of West Bloomfield, MI; and his brother, Richard, and his wife, Cindy, of Port Matilda, PA.

Charlie was the beloved grandfather of Matthew Kochakian of San Francisco, CA; Dr. Nicholas Kochakian of New York, NY; Isabella Kochakian of Los Angeles, CA; and James Kochakian of Fort Myers, FL.

He is also survived by his brother-in-law, Edward Annaian, and his wife Janet of Andover, MA; sisters-in-law Maryann Afarian of North Andover, MA, Maria Annaian of North Andover, MA, and Rose Annaian of Methuen, MA. He leaves his godsons, Gregory Afarian and Michael Kochakian, as well as many beloved nieces, nephews, and cousins. He was predeceased by cherished family members Khatchik Afarian, Michael Annaian, John Annaian, and Rosie Annaian, as well as his beloved godson, Peter Afarian.

The funeral service was conducted by Rev. Fathers Stephan Baljian, Khachadoor Kesablian, Vart Gylozyan, Sevak Gabrielian, Tateos Abdalian, Tadeos Barseghyan, Kevork Arakelian, Arakel Aljalian and Charlie's brother Garabed Kochakian on Monday, December 1, 2025, at St. Gregory's Armenian Church, North Andover, MA 01845. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to St. Gregory's Armenian Church at www.saintgregory.org.

James "Jack" Giragosian, CPC

Mark J. Giragosian

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COMMUNITY NEWS

ANCA Condemns Reckless Trump Pardon Of Corrupt Rep. Henry Cuellar

CUELLAR, from page 7

The Indictment: Nearly \$600,000 in Azerbaijani Bribes

The federal indictment against Rep. Cuellar and his wife Imelda, unsealed in May 2024, presents extensive evidence that Rep. Cuellar accepted at least \$598,000 in bribes from two foreign entities: an oil and gas company wholly owned and controlled by the Government of Azerbaijan, and a bank headquartered in Mexico City. The indictment accused Cuellar and his wife of laundering foreign bribe payments through Texas shell companies, disguising their arrangement with consulting contracts for which Imelda Cuellar performed little or no legitimate work.

The indictment explicitly states: “With respect to Azerbaijan, in exchange for the bribe payments, Henry Cuellar promised to influence U.S. foreign policy in favor of Azerbaijan. Henry Cuellar agreed, among other things, to influence a series of legislative measures relating to Azerbaijan’s conflict with neighboring Armenia; to insert language favored by Azerbaijan into legislation and committee reports governing certain security and economic aid programs; to deliver a pro-Azerbaijan speech on the floor of the House of Representatives; and to consult with representatives of Azerbaijan regarding their efforts to lobby the United States government.”

Internal communications revealed by the indictment show Azerbaijani diplomats referring to Cuellar as “El Jefe” (“The Boss”) and acknowledging his central role in advancing their foreign influence operations in Washington. In response to an Azerbaijani diplomat’s request for assistance with U.S. legislation, Cuellar indicated his readiness to help, stating he would “try [his] best” to influence legislative outcomes in Azerbaijan’s favor.

Blocking Aid to Artsakh, Undermining Armenian American Advocacy

According to the indictment, Cuellar’s corrupt actions had tangible and devastating consequences for Armenian communities. On multiple occasions, Cuellar communicated directly with Azerbaijani officials to discuss strategies for overriding Armenian American interests in Congress. The indictment details how Cuellar agreed to block amendments advanced by members of the Congressional Armenian Caucus that would have secured humanitarian relief for Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) or strengthened U.S. support for Armenia.

In one particularly egregious instance documented in the indictment, on September 1, 2017, an Azerbaijani diplomat texted Cuellar a screenshot of an amendment to fund efforts to clear land mines in the Nagorno-Karabakh region — efforts that were supported by Armenian Americans and opposed by Azerbaijan. Cuellar replied: “I see it. We work on it.” The diplomat responded, “Thank you Boss!”

In text message exchanges during the summer of 2020, as tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia escalated toward open war, Cuellar repeatedly promised Azerbaijani diplomats he would “add Rider on bases” and assured them, “I have another amendment I may add this week” to advance Azerbaijan’s interests against Armenia.

The indictment further uncovers how Rep. Cuellar agreed to insert pro-Azerbaijan speeches into Congressional records and to advance legislation that would undermine U.S. aid to Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). In one email, Cuellar promised Azerbaijani contacts to “set up a meeting” with U.S. defense officials to discuss matters benefiting Azerbaijan, directly linking his legislative actions to the bribes received.

“Rep. Cuellar not only betrayed the trust of his South Texas constituents — by taking foreign money to obstruct our community’s right to petition our government — he cheated Americans of Armenian heritage from all across our country of our Constitutional right to honest representation,” the ANCA noted in a September 2025 letter to the U.S. Attorney. “By conspiring to rig U.S. foreign policy in favor of authoritarian Azerbaijan, Rep. Cuellar undermined American support for Armenian Christians, enabling Azerbaijan’s genocidal ethnic cleansing of Artsakh.”

Armenian Americans as Victims Under the Crime Victims’ Rights Act

In September 2025, the ANCA formally called upon U.S. Attorney Nicholas J. Ganjei to recognize Americans of Armenian heritage as victims of Congressman Cuellar’s criminal conspiracy with Azerbaijan under the Crime Victims’ Rights Act (18 U.S.C. § 3771). This designation would permit Armenian American community representatives, including the ANCA, to submit victim impact statements and ensure the harms they suffered are factored into any sentencing or restitution decisions in the case.

In the letter to the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Texas, ANCA Executive Director Aram Hamparian underscored that Rep. Cuellar’s alleged corruption deprived Armenian Americans of their constitutional right to petition their government and to participate in the democratic process free of foreign manipulation.

“Congressman Cuellar’s actions harmed Armenian Americans by undermining the free exercise of our constitutional right ‘peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances,’ covertly conspiring with a foreign entity to reduce the impact of our advocacy as American citizens on the U.S. legislative process,” explained Hamparian in the letter.

Trump’s pardon effectively denies Armenian Americans their right as victims to

see justice served and to have their harms acknowledged in sentencing proceedings.

A Decades-Long Pattern of Azerbaijani Influence Operations

The ANCA has, over the past three decades, warned of Azerbaijan’s efforts to buy influence in Washington, with Rep. Cuellar serving as a linchpin in these operations. As early as 2013, Cuellar accepted trips to Azerbaijan arranged by intermediaries later convicted of concealing Azerbaijani state sponsorship. From there, his ties to Azerbaijani oil companies deepened into what prosecutors laid bare as a years-long bribery scheme.

In January 2013, one of Cuellar’s organizations sponsored Rep. Cuellar and his wife to travel to Istanbul, Turkey and Baku, Azerbaijan at a cost of \$26,125. Shortly after the Cuellars returned to the United States, Azerbaijani officials discussed recruiting Cuellar to promote Azerbaijan’s interests in Congress. An Azerbaijani diplomat emailed the director of the Azerbaijani oil company’s Washington, D.C. office, noting that Cuellar had just been appointed to the Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, and writing: “[t]he good news is that Cuellar was just in Baku.” The diplomat continued, “[w]e need to work with these offices to make sure we build an anti-[Representative-1] coalition”—referring to a member of the Congressional Armenian Caucus.

The magnitude of Azerbaijan’s global influence operations was first exposed by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project in its report on the “Azerbaijani Laundromat” — which found that, between 2012 and 2014, over \$2.5 billion was laundered through slush funds into the accounts of European politicians and international organizations to suffocate criticism of the Azerbaijani regime’s abuses and promote Azerbaijan’s image on the world stage.

In 2013, reports revealed that a congressional delegation to Azerbaijan involving 10 members of Congress and over 30 staffers had been paid for without their knowledge by SOCAR, the state-owned oil company of Azerbaijan. The trip was the subject of an Ethics Committee investigation and ultimately led to the indictment of the delegation’s organizer, Kemal Oksuz, who worked closely with Cuellar to connect Azerbaijani oil executives with U.S. business leaders and elected officials.

Undermining U.S. Interests and Democratic Principles

In a June 2024 Huffington Post op-ed calling for Cuellar’s expulsion, ANCA Policy Director Alex Galitsky and National Grassroots Director Gev Iskajyan wrote: “As a matter of principle, Cuellar’s alleged transgressions should have warranted strong action regardless of which government he had scandalous dealings with. But the fact that Cuellar appears to have chosen

to act on behalf of a regime engaged in the torture of prisoners of war, the execution of civilians, the systematic destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, and the blockade and forced displacement of 150,000 Armenian civilians last year demonstrates a contempt not only for our democratic process but for the principles of human rights and international law that supposedly underpin U.S. foreign policy.”

The op-ed continued: “In light of the gravity of the charges against Cuellar, both Republicans and Democrats must realize there’s much more on the line than control of the House of Representatives. As the U.S. hemorrhages credibility on the world stage amid its abject failure to uphold the principles of democracy and human rights it proclaims to hold dear, the refusal to expel Cuellar will only signal to Azerbaijan—and other abusive regimes—that U.S. democracy is for sale.”

Trump’s pardon sends precisely that signal: that foreign bribes to members of Congress will be tolerated, that American democracy can indeed be purchased by authoritarian regimes, and that there will be no accountability for betraying the American people’s trust.

Call for Congressional Action

The ANCA emphasized that Trump’s pardon makes Congressional action even more urgent. While the pardon may shield Cuellar from criminal prosecution, it does nothing to restore the integrity of Congress or accountability to the American people. The House of Representatives retains its constitutional authority — and duty — to expel members who have fundamentally betrayed their oath of office.

The ANCA is continuing its nationwide #ExpelCuellar campaign, demanding Cuellar’s immediate removal from Congress. The initiative rallies grassroots activists across the country to press their Representatives to vote for Cuellar’s expulsion, to demand a House Ethics Committee investigation into Azerbaijan’s broader foreign influence operations, and to bar Azerbaijani officials and registered foreign agents from access to Capitol Hill until a full accounting of this corruption is delivered.

Armenian Americans and all concerned citizens are urged to visit anca.org/expel to contact their Representatives, demand Cuellar’s expulsion, and share resources with their networks.

“Recognizing Armenian-Americans as victims of Cuellar’s conspiracy is not just symbolic — it’s a concrete step toward justice and accountability,” added Hamparian. “Trump’s pardon makes that impossible in the courts. But Congress can still act. Only by expelling Cuellar and dismantling Azerbaijan’s illicit influence operations can we restore faith in the integrity of U.S. policy on issues of concern to Americans of Armenian heritage and our many allies across our great nation.”

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Tekeyan Cultural Association's Hagop Boghosian Fund Marks 24th Year

ALTADENA, Calif. — Twenty four years ago, when former *Nor Or* editor Hagop Boghosian, a dedicated member and leader of Tekeyan Cultural Association serving in Lebanon and Los Angeles, passed away in California, his wife, Anitsa Boghosian and family decided that all donations in lieu of flowers would be allocated to a fund managed by the Tekeyan Cultural Association of USA and Canada Central Board.

The board decided that the annual proceeds from this fund were to be designated as prizes for students at Vahan Tekeyan School in Yerevan, awarded annually to those who wrote the best compositions on topics proposed by the teachers. The Tekeyan portfolio, which includes Boghosian Fund, is directed and managed by the treasurer Maro Bedrosian, who meticulously followed every year that the proceeds are used for the intended purpose.

Hagop Boghosian believed deeply in Armenian values, particularly in the importance of educating the new generation while preserving the Armenian language and encouraging youth to write and express themselves in Armenian.

For 24 years, the interests from this fund have been allocated annually to the top three graduating students at Vahan Tekeyan School in Yerevan who submit the best compositions, administered through Anitsa Boghosian and teachers.

At the time, a classroom at the Vahan Tekeyan School in Yerevan was named after Hagop Boghosian.

The purpose of these prizes is to encourage students' knowledge of the Armenian language, foster creative and written skills, support the development of nation-



The principal of the Yerevan school, Dzovinar Martanyan, is surrounded by students and teachers at Boghosian Classroom

al identity and critical thinking skills and preserve the memory and values of Hagop Boghosian. Throughout these years, the themes of the compositions have been decided by the teachers.

The fund continues to support the students every year.

Mayda Kuredjian
Altadena, California



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Funding Hope by Playing Ball

VARTANIAN, from page 7
Mudville 9, is 6-3. Vartanian has been batting .600, and he has an impressive on-base percentage of .732. Vartanian splits his time between third base and the pitcher's mound. All of that is fun, but what the money can do is truly important.

"Nobody questions how expensive cancer treatment is for kids," said Stephanie E. Green, MD, MS, a pediatric endocrinologist at Johns Hopkins Children's Center. "We feel for those kids. We have a heart for those kids. That's what I want everyone to feel about pediatric obesity — that it's not a choice. There are choices we make that worsen it, ... that's true, but it's not a choice to have a slower metabolism and an appetite that doesn't match it because there's a dysregulation in the brain."

Green added that the funds raised will go

towards both research for endocrine conditions and programs. One of those programs is the Healthy Families Program, a multi-disciplinary clinic that covers behavioral psychology, nutrition, culinary medicine, and group personal training. The program goal is to help the child and the entire family.

Vartanian believes there is a lot of private-sector money that could be directed towards research. He took on this project because he loves baseball and believes his job is to connect private funds to kids who need them.

"One of the things that gives you hope is finding research, finding tools, and finding out you're not alone," said Vartanian. "Anybody who's ever got a disease, one of the things that's important is finding out you're not alone, because that's critical to having hope."



Tom Vartanian (Dianne Klimek-Rovner photo)

ADVERTISE IN THE MIRROR



Arts & Culture

Project Save Presents First Full Exhibit in New Space

WATERTOWN — “What would you bring with you if you had to leave your home immediately?” French-Armenian photojournalist and documentary filmmaker Astrig Agopian’s multimedia exhibition, “Like There’s No Tomorrow,” poses this question as it documents the lives of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, where the Azerbaijan-led war broke out in 2020 and escalated in 2023 into a mass displacement widely described by human rights organizations as ethnic cleansing. Like *There’s No Tomorrow* is on display at Watertown’s Project Save Photo Archive gallery through Jan. 17, 2026.

This timely exhibit focuses on a region that Armenians have inhabited for millennia and which has endured centuries of upheaval. Agopian’s photographs – both documentary- and portraiture-style – and news-style videos dig deeply into questions of cultural heritage, identity in diaspora, and wartime displacement. The exhibit is in partnership with ART WORKS Projects, a Chicago- and Hague-based visual arts non-profit.

Agopian’s experience as a photojournalist for international news outlets offered an opportunity to cover the unfolding conflict in her homeland, but what she discovered while documenting the war was a unique view inside the emotional toll on the region’s inhabitants. Her multi-year travels to the area garnered interview footage and extensive photographic documentation of war and its effects, following individuals and families as they navigated violence, loss and displacement. She says she sought ways to go beyond the expected coverage: the images of people fleeing on clogged roads, desperate faces and bombed out villages.

Her exhibition emphasizes a stirring collection of photographic diptychs highlighting the individuals Agopian encountered over several years, offering portraits of both the people and the objects they preserved when forced to flee. Simple belongings like coffee jars, keys, and family heirlooms come to represent all that remains of a once bustling home life in the region. The project combines powerful

photography, oral histories, and multimedia assets into a living archive that also serves educational and advocacy purposes.

“Astrig invites us to consider how people live in and endure the unimaginable: war, hatred and revisionist history, and what they cling to or carry with them when they’re forced to flee,” says Dr. Arto Vaun, Executive Director of Project Save. “Her work reflects our mission to preserve and share the stories and images that define the global Armenian experience.”

To deepen the narrative, the exhibition includes historical photographs
see EXHIBIT, page 15



Barbara Madatova as Sonya in “Evil Spirit” (1927)

Bagratunyan Researches Armenian Women in Silent Films

By Haykaram Nahapetyan

Mirror-Spectator Video Correspondent

In recent years, Aurora Mardiganian’s name has become familiar to wider audiences thanks to the rediscovery of “Ravished Armenia,” the silent film in which she portrayed her own story, and also due to the Aurora Humanitarian Prize established by Ruben Vardanyan and Noubar Afeyan. In Armenia, however, a researcher has begun to view Aurora (Arshaluys) Mardiganian in a different context: as one of several Armenian women who appeared in silent cinema. For nearly a year, Ruzan Bagratunyan has been studying Armenian actresses, as well as the technicians and administrators who contributed to early film, and published a book on them in 2024.



Zhasmen (Mariam Grigoryan)

actress of a silent film. Unfortunately, this 1911 film is lost.

After her, the first instance of a film which has reached our times with an Armenian actress dates from 1913, when Armenian actress Mariam Grigoryan — known as Zhasmen — appeared in “The Keys to Happiness,” a two-part Russian silent film. Originally from Tiflis (present-day Tbilisi, Georgia), Zhasmen played numerous roles in Armenian, Georgian, and Azerbaijani cinema after returning to the Caucasus. Ruzan’s research illuminates the important role Armenians played in the formation of Azerbaijani cinematography: Hamo Beknazaryan directed some

continued on next page

Isabel Bayrakdarian Thrills in Carnegie Hall in Tribute to Catholicos Aram I

By Florence Avakian

NEW YORK — It was both a spiritual and unforgettable evening of music and emotion — for the 30th anniversary of Catholicos Aram I of the Great House of Cilicia. Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall on November 13 was packed as celebrated soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian came on stage dressed in demure grey lace gown, accompanied by harpist Ellie Chocate, flutist Ray Furuta, and on duduk Mher Mnatsakanyan.

The three-part program, with no intermission, included “Marian Chants, Hymns and Children’s Prayers,” play songs and lullabies by the legendary Komitas Vartabed, and more recent play songs and lullabies from historical Armenia and the diaspora.

The program was carefully and profoundly planned by noted soprano Bayrakdarian, who has written that “the seeds of this special project were planted at a young age, when I



Superstar soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian at Carnegie Hall

would often listen to my mother sing prayers, lullabies and songs from a place that seemed far away yet inexplicably familiar. I know how powerful these songs and hymns are and how they can heal and soothe the soul. They remind us that we all come from the same source and that we are all related and forever connected.”

The second section of the performance was dedicated to the play songs and lullabies of Komitas Vartabed — many of them unknown to most people but heartfelt and profound. Bayrakdarian explained that before the Genocide they were recorded and unheard. But after the Genocide, they were recorded by his students and survivors and sorrowfully recalled.

As the program became more celebratory, the singer reappeared in more colorful gowns, adding to the increased feeling of joy and celebration.

This unique performance, which the singer has thoughtfully thought out and profoundly planned for many
see CONCERT, page 17



Bagratunyan Researches Armenian Women in Silent Films

from previous page
of Azerbaijan’s earliest films, and Armenian actors, including Zhasmen, were part of his teams.

The same is true of early Ottoman-Turkish cinema. When Muhsin Ertuğrul began directing the first Turkish films, numerous Armenians worked in the industry, including Siranush Aleksanian, Roza Felekian, Azniv Minakian, Vahram Papazian, Onnik Binemecian, and others.

“While filming ‘A Love Tragedy in Istanbul’ (1922), the Armenian actors spoke Armenian among themselves. Radical Turkish clerics overheard them, attacked them, and beat them severely. French soldiers stationed nearby — this was in 1922, when Istanbul was under Entente control — intervened and rescued them. Vahram Papazian later described the incident in his memoirs,” Ruzan recounts.

Another pioneering figure was Maria Goricheva-Kazanjieva, a Russian-Armenian actress who gained prominence across Russia and later the Soviet Union. She may have appeared in films as early as 1911, making her earlier than Zhasmen.

One of the founders of Soviet cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, held deep respect for Nina Agajanova, who wrote the scripts for his works. “Her home in Moscow served as a gathering place for leading Soviet filmmakers,” Ruzan adds. Armenian women were therefore not only actresses but also scriptwriters, educators, and administrators.

Ruzan’s research also brought to light Arsha Avanesova, an Armenian from Art-

sakh who may have been the first Soviet woman filmmaker to direct silent films. In addition to her production work, she taught film, and many iconic figures of Soviet cinema — including Eldar Ryazanov and Vasili Katanyan — were among her students.

In 1923, the Soviet Armenian government sent Hamo Beknazaryan and Daniel Dznuni to Tiflis with just 60 rubles to purchase equipment for newly founded PetKino, the State Film Organization of Armenia. “This was the founding capital of Armenian cinema,” Ruzan explains. Beknazaryan’s first film was Shirvanzade’s “Namus” (Honor).

The film was screened both in Russia and the United States, achieving tremendous success for its time. Its box office revenues reached 474,000 rubles — an extraordinary sum — which allowed PetKino to repay its loans and finance new productions.

Hasmik (Taguhi Hakobyan), Nina Manucharyan, Olga Maysuryan, Maria Shahubatyan Tatueva, Arusyak Voskanyan, Olga Gulazyan, and others were among the first actresses of Armenian silent cinema. Sate-nik Adamyan wrote one of the early scripts.

“Many of these women had no formal training, yet they performed remarkably well,” Ruzan emphasizes. “Their work and legacy significantly advanced Armenian cinema.”

An accompanying video at mirrorspec-tator.com includes excerpts from an interview with Ruzan Bagratunyan as well as scenes from early Armenian silent films.

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Ruzanna Bagratunyan’s book on Armenian women of silent cinema



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Recipe Corner



by Christine
Vartanian Datian



Nuvo Olive Oil’s Balsamic Glazed Chicken with Rosemary

LONG BEACH, Calif. — “We are Josh and Nathan Mardigian, two brothers born and raised in Michigan. Back in 2012 we were working regular jobs and decided to visit our parents, who had just retired and were living in Chico, CA. While visiting, we became aware that our family owned a 125-year-old olive orchard in the area but unfortunately no one was taking care of the trees. At one point there was even talk of bulldozing the olive orchard and to sell the land. We knew we had to keep these beautiful trees and olives. We couldn’t let that happen.”



Nathan and Josh Mardigian

“During that visit, we met by chance the man who would later mill for us. An Italian Master Miller whose facility was located on a remote property about 40 minutes from our farm. Not only did he learn his craftsmanship the old-fashioned way, on the classic stone mill and vertical press systems, but he expanded his knowledge to state-of-the-art and advanced machinery. With his profound know-how and with our entrepreneurial spirit, we truly believed we could save the olive orchard. We asked our parents to give us a chance and let us keep the orchard. We promised we would pour our heart and souls into saving the trees and would bring high-quality oils to our community. With our first harvest in 2012, Nuvo Olive Oil was born.”

Nuvo Olive Oil has also been ranked #70 in the world out of thousands of olive oil producers worldwide according to Olive Oil Ranking.

“Unlike grocery store balsamics that are often mixed with syrups and additives, Nuvo’s Traditional Godfather Balsamic Vinegar is aged in wooden casks in Modena, a little village in Italy, giving it a pure, bold, and authentic flavor. It’s a staple for drizzling, glazing, or elevating everyday meals into something unforgettable. From the bold, velvety depth of our dark balsamics to the light, refreshing notes of our white balsamics and handcrafted vinaigrettes, each bottle is created to bring gourmet flavor to your table. When you cook with a balsamic as rich and velvety as our Godfather Balsamic Vinegar, you don’t need a complicated recipe to create something extraordinary. This dish brings together juicy chicken, fragrant rosemary, and the deep sweetness of aged balsamic for a meal that tastes like it came straight out of an Italian countryside kitchen.”

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“One study published in the journal Diabetes Care found that vinegar improves insulin sensitivity after meals high in carbohydrates for those with insulin resistance or type 2 diabetes. This effect is particularly noteworthy as vinegar ingestion helps in managing blood glucose levels more efficiently, which could be beneficial for diabetes management. Additionally, balsamic vinegar contains antioxidants that combat cell damage and promote heart health.”

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 medium skinless boneless chicken breasts
- 1/4 cup Nuvo Godfather Balsamic Vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Nuvo Early Harvest extra virgin olive oil (or your favorite Nuvo extra virgin olive oil)
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 sprig fresh rosemary (or 1 teaspoon dried rosemary)
- Salt and freshly cracked black pepper to taste

PREPARATION:

Pat chicken breasts dry and season with salt and pepper. Heat Nuvo extra virgin olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Add chicken and sear 3–4 minutes per side until golden brown.

Reduce heat slightly. Add minced garlic and rosemary, sautéing for about 30 seconds until fragrant. Pour in the Godfather Balsamic Vinegar. Let it simmer for 2–3 minutes, stirring occasionally, until it thickens into a glossy glaze. Spoon the balsamic glaze over the chicken before serving. Pair with roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, or a fresh green salad. For a true Italian-inspired meal, serve this dish with a drizzle of extra Godfather Balsamic Vinegar on the plate and a side of crusty Italian or French bread to soak up the sauce.

Serves 2

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Singer Mary Balian Releases New Song *Shnorhakalutyun*

BURBANK, Calif. — Armenian Singer Mary Balian has released her latest song, *Shnorhakalutyun*, produced by Gilbert Hovsepien.

Balian has been recording and performing Armenian Christian music for nearly twenty years. She has previously released the albums “Bashdenk” and “Hooysus Es,” numerous other singles, including Armenian Christmas music, and is planning a new album release next year.

“Through my contemporary Armenian music ministry, I’ve had the opportunity to sing in Armenia and meet incredible believers all over the world. Time and time again, God has shown me where my heart’s desire and passion

is — in serving the Armenian people and creating music to worship God in the Armenian language,” said Balian.

Balian graduated from UCLA, where she sang in the Awaken a cappella group. (alongside performers like Sara Bareilles). She has had a heart for Armenian music ministry since she was a child. She grew up at United Armenian Congregational Church. She performed at AMAA Summer Camps in Armenia, where she shared and donated her music to hundreds of kids. In addition, she has performed in many venues and events in Los Angeles and in Armenia over the years.

Juggling full-time work as a school counselor, being a

mom to her two daughters Lena and Lori with her husband Manny, and putting out new music every year, Balian is busy – and she is also working on various writing projects, in addition to the coming album. The nonprofit charity, Bashde, whose mission is to promote Armenian worship music, has also assisted Balian’s work over the years through the support of many individuals and churches.

Shnorhakalutyun and the rest of Mary Balian’s music is available on Apple Music, Spotify, Amazon Music and other streaming services. Her Instagram and YouTube Channel are at @MaryBalianMusic. For more information visit www.marybalian.com.



ARTS & CULTURE

Books

The Miracle Has Happened: The Armenian Creatives’ Latest Initiative

By Arpi Sarafian
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

At a time when faith in a viable future for Western Armenian, the language spoken by most diasporan Armenians, seems to be ebbing to a vanishing point, the Armenian Creatives, the collective of young Armenian artists who came together in Brooklyn, New York, in July 2018 to create a community of support, boldly declare Western Armenian to “still [be] thriving” and “already presently here and potentially always.”

Motivated by their genuine concern over the gradual loss of Western Armenian, the Creatives initiated Those words, that offer to us, a three-volume bi-lingual — Western Armenian and English — series based on a new understanding of translation that stretches language beyond textual notations to include the social and the emotional nuances embedded into words, thereby ensuring a more complete interpretation of the original text that semantics alone could not communicate.

A translation is always a recreation of the original for it involves the negotiation of personal meanings held behind words that cannot be translated into words, notes co-editor Caroline Partamian in her Editor’s Note to the January 2023 inaugural issue of the series. The second issue, Those words, that offer to us: Handwritten Texts (May 2024) expands the process further to include the memories and the stories that surrounded original handwritten texts when they were being created. The third volume, Those words, that offer to us: Seeking Sentiments (self-published with support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, September 2025), stretches the capacity of expression even further by having the contributors engage with a phrase that sums up a sentiment “they long to communicate.” Inner feelings are arguably the most difficult to translate. They are perhaps even “untranslatable.”

Aram Ronaldo accomplishes his “translation” of the phrase “wave your magic wand” with the endless possibilities of magic. His “I have been raised on the power of magic” is rooted in his grandmother’s kitchen where the realities of Nene’s “small, slightly burnt wooden spoon” and the recipes that she preserved as she survived the Armenian Genocide mix with the fantastical tales she tells while making ma’amoul cookies on a Sunday afternoon. “Nene would wave her magic wand around the kitchen, making little miracles,” writes Aram. It is Aram’s ardent wish “that we all wave our magic wands . . . and invoke a few miracles daily.”

In much the same spirit of excitement, Levon Kafafian envisions a future for Western Armenian “flowing like water” a thousand years from now. Levon applies the phrase “like water,” which his middle school Armenian language teacher used when she asked the class to learn an assigned text by heart, to a Western Armenian that has survived, having evolved enough with which to write “a story taking place millennia from now.”

Slightly shifting focus, contributor Anahid Yahjian constructs the phrase “future nostalgia” to explore the “awful darkness” and the “horror” of the losses endured by her Western Armenian ancestors. The world the artist inhabits, however, is not a sick world. Even as she remains connected to a past of loss and of illness, Anahid can shift her gaze away from the “new, dreadful reality” that awaits each time. “My definition is ‘a nostalgia not for the past, but for the present and/or future,’” she notes with confidence.

Moving on, it is with immense joy that Hrayr Varaz reverses the doom and the gloom of the debilitating expression “Western Armenian is dying,” widely circulated currently, with his own phrase, “The immortal Western Armenian language is everywhere.” To show that the language is still “being read, heard, spoken and written,” Varaz shares a library of Western Armenian texts, audio-books, online sources, creative expressions, recorded discussions, documentaries and more for the reader to savor.

Kamee Abrahamian and Alexia Hatun work in collaboration to explore the phrase “freedom dreams” in a dialogue session with a group of Armenians from different backgrounds. The transcript of the participants’ conversation highlights their belief in the importance of living and of dreaming in the present. The suggestion of a partaker, however, that living as an Armenian means to be closed off in “a prison of Armenianness” seems to belie the Creatives’ radical openness and their creative approach to translating. The readiness of these pioneering artists to “play with language” and to honor even errors and discrepancies as freedoms could not “come from a place of fear.” Nonetheless, one leaves the group with their heartfelt invitation “to continue dreaming of freedom collectively in our communities.”

The Armenian Creatives’ is not some utopian vision of an impossible future. The future these artists envision is a future connected to the reality of a history of displacement, to the history of a Genocide that took place over a hundred years ago and that is ongoing with the more recent uprooting of an entire population from their ancestral



lands in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabagh. The commitment these men and women have to their identities as Armenians and to revitalizing Western Armenian, a language whose very absence highlights its deep significance in shaping our lives today, is part of that reality. The unwavering faith the Creatives have in a bright future for Western Armenian is testimony that the miracle has happened. The phrases the contributors pick out for their translation exercise are all forward-looking.

The Creatives are not alone. There is an unprecedented effort in the diaspora to revive Western Armenian. Armenian Studies programs in a number of universities offer courses in Western Armenian and host lectures to engage a new generation. The Glendale Unified School District is in the process of approving Western Armenian immersion programs into its curriculum. The Western Armenian Online College offers online courses to help those born in the diaspora, with little or no knowledge of Western Armenian, to better express themselves. Developing fluency in a revived Western Armenian can be enormously empowering and might just be the key to protecting and preserving its legacy.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is at the forefront of the preservation and protection efforts. A most exciting recent example of their generous support is the award granted to The Centre for Western Armenian Studies that has partnered with the online platform Booktime to translate over one hundred children’s books into Western Armenian.

Project Save Presents First Exhibit in New Space

EXHIBIT, from page 12

from Project Save’s own collections, presented alongside Agopian’s contemporary work. These archival images document Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh across the 19th and 20th centuries, amplifying a continuum of Armenian presence and resilience in the region.

“Like There’s No Tomorrow” can be seen at the Project Save Photo Archive gallery, located at 600 Pleasant St. Gallery hours are 2-5:30p on Tuesdays and Thursdays and by appointment. The Gallery is closed on Christmas Day and New Years Day. Exhibition closed on January 17th. Open starting November 25th.

The exhibition is supported by ART WORKS Projects’ Emerging Lens Fellowship. Partially funded through the National Endowment for the Arts, Emerging Lens provides unrestricted stipends, professional mentorship, editorial and production support to emerging visual storytellers working to document global human rights issues through lived experiences.



A fence remnant in Nagorno-Karabakh frames a place to which most won’t return (photo Astrig Agopian)

ARTS & CULTURE

Alexander Listengort

‘Armenians and Jews Have Lots of Things to Learn from Each Other’

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN-HAIFA, Israel — Born in Moscow in 1993, Alexander Listengort graduated from the Moscow State Linguistic University, where he studied International Journalism and Public Relations. Later, his curiosity led him to Ankara University’s Tömer Center, where he immersed himself in Turkish language and culture. Later he volunteered in the Israel Defense Forces.

Listengort has worked at the Embassy of Armenia in Russia, the TASS news agency in Moscow, and the Berlitz Language School in Tel-Aviv. He launched first Ulpan (class for Hebrew learners) in Yerevan.

An author, linguist, and spiritual practitioner, he has published a Hebrew textbook as well as the books *A New Stage of Awakening* and *Ocean of Divinity*. Alongside his writing, he teaches yoga and conducts sessions with Tibetan singing bowls, meditation, and yogic breathing. He works as interpreter and foreign languages instructor.

A true polyglot, Listengort moves with ease among Russian, Armenian, Hebrew, English, Spanish and Adyghe. He also hosts several Telegram channels dedicated to Hebrew, the Armenian language, and the Adyghe people (Circassians), with a combined audience of more than 4,000, and runs a YouTube channel followed by over 29,000 subscribers.

Alexander, you have a deep admiration for languages. In your view, what matters most in learning a new one — clear-headed reasoning, emotional connection, or something else entirely?

From my point of view, anyone is capable of acquiring a foreign language if three key factors are taken into account: genuine interest, strong motivation, and an appropriate learning method. Moreover, it is essential that a language be learned with joy; otherwise, the brain simply won’t absorb it and will, in some way, resist. I would even say that languages are *acquired* rather than *learned*, unlike poems or laws. A language is not merely a collection of new words and sounds—it is a vast spiritual and cultural system encompassing the cultural, mental, and folk dimensions of the people who speak it. In this regard, I am especially proud and honored to speak and read the Armenian language, one of the most astonishing, profound, and universal systems I have ever encountered.

Your grandparents were translators. Do you believe a passion for languages can be inherited, or is it something one develops independently?

Indeed, genetics play a significant role. However, even if your ancestors had nothing to do with foreign languages, you still have a great opportunity to start this tradition yourself. As for me, my great-grandfather Lev, my grandfather Yuri, and my grandmother Maria all graduated from the same university I attended. Interestingly, I discovered this only in the fourth year of my studies—that it was, in fact, the very same place.

You’ve said that each language has its own energy. How would you describe the energy of the Armenian language?

The Armenian language, to me, is all the rocky landscapes of Armenia, its

magnificent lakes, and the flavors of its fruits. It is exceptionally rich and vibrant in sound. Moreover, one can trace Sanskrit, Persian, Aramaic, and, above all, ancient Indo-European roots in Armenian words, which naturally gives it a completely unique character. Wherever I am in the world, hearing Armenian fills me with warmth and a sense of home deep in my heart. It is worth noting that Armenian varies significantly even across its own provinces, and, of course, among the diaspora abroad.

While exploring Armenian, have you come across words or expressions that are particularly difficult to translate into other languages?

Sure. Probably saying that “tsaved tanem” is hard to translate and explain to foreigners would sound too trivial. But let’s take such words as “meghraham” — “with the taste of honey.” I noticed similarities between Armenian and Hebrew: the Armenian word “gaghut,” meaning “colony” or a group of ethnic Armenians living outside their homeland, and the Hebrew “galut,” referring to those who live outside Israel. Same story with the words “Yerikir” and “Aretz” — the Promised Land, if you will. The Land of the Ancestors. Even though commonly they just mean “land” or “country.”

You translate actively from five languages. What translations from Armenian have you done so far, and into which languages?

Probably the most interesting experience I had was in 2018, while serving in the Israel Defense Forces. I received a call from the Ministry of Heritage requesting a translation of three pages from Western Armenian into Hebrew and English. These pages were from a very old book, printed in Beirut in 1918, dedicated to an Armenian officer who fought against the Turks and Germans as part of the Armenian Legion of the French Army in the Holy Land.

For quite some time, I was also passionate about producing poetic and eurythmic translations from Armenian into Russian of songs by renowned Armenian artists such as Ruben Hakhverdyan, Artur Meschian and Vahan Artsruni. I adore Mr. Artsruni’s songs, specifically *Yes inch Tam Qez Im Ser, Chanaparh* and *Yerikir Armenia*. It has been 12 years that I listen to these masterpieces! My goal was to allow Russian-speaking audiences, including Armenians, to appreciate the depth and brilliance of their masterpieces — and, of course, to refine my own translation skills.

Today, I dedicate part of my time to comparing Armenian translations of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible).

Your Ph.D. research examines “The Holocaust in the perception of the Circassians and the Adyghe genocide in the perception of the State of Israel.” Could a similar comparative study be made between the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, or is that still a taboo subject in Israel?

Frankly, I feel sorry for the Armenian people that the recognition of the Armenian Genocide in Israel comes up on the agenda every year amid geopolitical crises, yet still has not been officially acknowledged. However, I want Armenians to know that Israeli scientists, journalists, and artists frequently raise this issue in the local



media and are often astonished that the state authorities seem to act as if they do not hear.

Certainly, as a small nation surrounded by powerful neighbors with long-standing conflicts, Israel must first and foremost do everything possible to ensure its own security. Maintaining specific ties with several Muslim-majority states that deny the Armenian Genocide is currently considered necessary to fulfill this goal.

Still, I believe that the warm relations between Jews and Armenians will eventually lead to new agreements between Israel and Armenia. There are no nations closer to the Jews than Armenians—and vice versa. I am proud to carry both identities within myself. In comparison, the situation of the Circassians is even more complicated. The Circassian genocide involved the forced displacement of about 95% of the Circassian population during the final stages of the Russian invasion of Circassia (the Northern Caucasus) in the 19th century. It has not been recognized as genocide by any country except Georgia, whose recognition was also politically motivated. Today, the historical Circassian homeland is divided among three national republics within the Russian Federation, and the Circassians — like Armenians and Jews — are dispersed across the world.

It is often said: “There is no country without Jews; there is no country without Armenians.” Between our two nations there seems to be a kind of silent competition — yet don’t you think we have more reasons to stand together?

I definitely see this as proof of God’s presence in the world and the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Both Jews and Armenians have a special spiritual mission as nations—to create, build, transform, and guide the world around them.

As for the matter of “competition,” unfortunately, Armenians—much like Jews—often tend to compete among themselves rather than between the two nations. This is a serious issue, as the lack of unity within both peoples poses a challenge to their survival and prosperous development. A crisis of unity and the loss of spiritual direction inevitably lead to external crises, manifesting in wars, anxiety, and other negative consequences.

What lessons could Armenians and Jews learn from each other today, and what are your strongest impressions of Armenia and Armenians?

I visited Armenia in 2014, 2015, 2018 and 2022 and spent overall 7 months there and 3 days in Artsakh back in 2014. When I first arrived in Armenia in 2014, as a 20-year-old student who had pooled all his savings to make the trip possible, I felt at

home. I felt that Armenia, like Israel, is a Promised Land. Both Armenians and Jews should never forget their spiritual mission and the importance of remaining united as a people.

From Israel, Armenia could learn to defend its interests and territories with greater determination and rigor. Young men and women from all over the world move to Israel to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, to honor ancestors who never had such an opportunity, and to protect the Promised Land. It would be wonderful if something similar could happen in Armenia.

Conversely, Israel could learn from Armenia to approach the world with greater lightness, compassion, and flexibility in its decisions, perspectives, and relations. We have much to learn from each other to ensure prosperity for future generations. Above all, we must first work on ourselves to make this possible.

Do you also foresee new Armenia-related projects in your future work?

I am always open to any inspiring projects connected with Armenia. At the moment, I am mostly occupied with raising my little son from my first marriage (by the way, we spent six months together in Armenia, in the marvelous village of Getargel, also known as Balahovit in Kotayk, when he was just 1.5 years old), working on my PhD, teaching, and interpreting. I am also preparing my fifth book, a collection of poetry, which includes a chapter of Armenian poems.

So, besides German Jonathan Spangenberg and Hungarian Benedek Zsigmond, you are the only other non-Armenian writing poetry in Armenian!

Most of my poems are in Russian. Of those I write in other languages, most are in Armenian. I also have some in Adyghe, English, Spanish, Turkish, and Hebrew. Yet it is primarily Armenian and Hebrew that inspire me to write in other languages.

I know some Russian Jewish intellectuals residing in Yerevan after Ukrainian war.

Truly, lots of talented Russians of Jewish identity moved to Yerevan and stayed there to live and grow. Armenia is a dream place to live. I was crying when I left Armenia by my car back in August 2022 via Bagratashen Armenia-Georgia border.

While caring for my family, I always strive to instill in its members a genuine respect for all nations, religions, and cultures worldwide, with a special focus on Armenians, who have played a profound role in my life. This all began with my encounter with the sacred Armenian alphabet, and I feel grateful every day for my enduring connection with Armenia.



ARTS & CULTURE

'Meet the Cartozians' at the Irene Diamond Stage at the Pershing Square Signature Center

By Christopher Atamian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Beautifully written, acted, and directed, "Meet the Cartozians," now playing at Pershing Square Signature Center, is arguably the finest play to date about the Armenian experience in America. More importantly, it transcends the specifics of Armenian-American history to offer universal insights — especially on questions of race and ethnicity. It has also garnered raves from mainstream outlets, including the *New York Times*.

Playwright Talene Monahan, whose work often explores identity, politics, and class, sets the play first in 1924 Portland and then, a century later, in 2024 Glendale. Six gifted actors portray characters across both eras.

Act I revisits the historic — but now largely forgotten — 1925 United States

v. Cartozian case. The U.S. government attempted to revoke Tateos Cartozian's naturalized citizenship by claiming that, as an "Asiatic," he did not qualify under existing naturalization laws. Cartozian hired sharp-witted Irish lawyer Wallace McCamant (Will Brill), who summoned a roster of expert witnesses — including renowned anthropologist Franz Boas—to demonstrate that Armenians were, in fact, considered white under the law.

Andrea Martin, pitch-perfect as matriarch Makrid Cartozian, fights to preserve Old World traditions, while Tamara Sevunts shines as her granddaughter Hazel, who steps in whenever needed to ensure things go "as they should" — even stopping her brother Vahan (Raffi Barsoumian) from testifying because he looks "too ethnic." Through this landmark case, the audience gains a deeper sense of the Armenian tragedy of 1915 and the absurdity of American

racial politics. As Sevunts, who grew up in Montreal, notes: "White is an Anglo-Saxon cultural construction. In Montreal — and Canada in general — one identifies with ethnicity, not race. Ethnically ambiguous, we Armenians pass as white."

Act II jumps to 2024, on the set of a Christmas episode of a new Netflix series hosted by "the most famous woman in the world," as historical drama gives way to sharp contemporary satire. Armenians in America have prospered, represented here by Nardek Vartoumian (Barsoumian), a university professor convinced he was denied tenure because he wasn't Muslim; Rose Sarkisian (Martin), a wealthy Calabasas boomer doyenne; and Leslie Malconian (Susan Pourfar), a politically correct housewife campaigning to add "Armenian" as a category in the 2020 Census; and city councilman Robert Zakian (Nacer).

As they await the host — who is very late — the guests begin bickering about the Armenian Genocide, race, color, religion, and what it truly means to be Armenian. Vartoumian and Malconian argue that Armenians should be included under MENA

or "people of color," while Rose recoils at the thought of Armenians not being considered white. After a volley of witty lines ("Sounds like you're calling me a Turk"), Rose reaches her limit: "What does that even mean? I'm going home to Calabasas." Producer Alan O'Brien (Brill), also Irish, leans into the conflict for the sake of the show. Eventually the guests reconcile and leave, and Zakian is left alone onstage. Sevunts finally enters as the famous reality star and delivers a moving monologue about missing her father. The ending is sweet, if unsettling.

As Sevunts observes, the play "is a comment on assimilation that points a finger at victimization, as Armenians continue to fight for cultural survival outside the theater as well."

Meet the Cartozians is directed with brilliance by David Cromer, featuring exquisite set design by Tatiana Kahvegian, meticulously crafted period costumes by Enver Chakartash, and subtle, evocative lighting by Stacy Derosier. Together, they create a scintillating night of theater.

The play will run through December 14.



Scene from "Meet the Cartozians"

Isabel Bayrakdarian Thrills in Carnegie Hall in Tribute to Catholicos Aram I

CONCERT, from page 12

years and performed to ecstatic audiences, was especially performed for the 30th anniversary for Catholicos Aram I.

The very special offering concluded with play songs and lullabies from historical Armenia and the diaspora. The world-famous singer's rendition of *Groong* literally brought the house down as Bayrakdarian and accompanists received a lengthy standing ovation and were presented with glori-

ous bouquets of flowers.

The charismatic artist, who deftly combines lyricism with dramatic instincts, is a professor and head of voice at the Music Department for the University of California, Santa Barbara, in addition to having performed at the Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House, La Scala, Paris Opera, Salzburg Festival, Bavarian State Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, among many others.



Soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian with Catholicos Aram I, seated front left, and other leaders from the Prelacy of the Armenian Church of America

CALENDAR OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

MASSACHUSETTS

DECEMBER 12-APRIL 26, 2026 —The Armenian Museum of American is proud to announce the opening of a landmark exhibition, "Arshile Gorky: Redrawing Community and Connections." This is the first exhibition of Arshile Gorky's work in an Armenian museum, and it caps off a series of programs initiated by the "100 Years of Arshile Gorky" Committee in the City of Watertown. Twenty-five works from lenders across the country including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Housatonic Museum of Art, Yale University Art Gallery, and many private collections. The exhibition is curated by Kim S. Theriault. Sponsored by the JHM Charitable Foundation. Armenian Museum of America, 65 Main Street, Watertown. Hours: Thurs.-Sun., 12pm-6pm. Please visit <https://www.armenianmuseum.org/arshile-gorky> for more information.

DECEMBER 13 — 130th Anniversary of the Lowell ARF. Program and showing of the award-winning film, "My Sweet Land," the story of the fall of Artsakh thru the eyes of an 11-yr old boy. Holy Archangels, Saint Michael and Saint Gabriel Armenian Church, 1280 Boston Rd., Haverhill. 6:00 p.m. Refreshments to follow. Reservations requested. Call or email Armen Jeknavorian, 978-265-9479; armenjeknavorian@gmail.com. or Ara Jeknavorian, 617-803-2612, ara.a.jeknavorian@gmail.com. Adults - \$25. Students - \$15.

DECEMBER 13 — Feast of St. Barbara, Saturday, 6 p.m. Holy Mass in English followed by a festive dinner and children's masked celebration at 7 p.m. at Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church, Nishan and Margrit Atinization Hall, 200 Lexington St., Belmont.

DECEMBER 14 — Erevan Choral Society Christmas Concert, Sunday, 7 p.m. Holy Trinity Armenian Church of Greater Boston, 145 Brattle Street, Cambridge. Details at: <https://htaac.org/event/erevan-choral-society-christmas-concert-2/>

DECEMBER 14 — Celebrate Valentine's Day, Saturday, February 14, Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church, Nishan and Margrit Atinization Hall, 200 Lexington St., Belmont. 7 p.m. An evening of love, laughter, and entertainment (surprise!). Details to follow.

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026 — Save the Date! Celebrating Contributions! Gala to benefit the Armenian Heritage Park at the InterContinental Boston.

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" or 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.

COMMENTARY

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What Does Armenia Have to Do With the Abraham Accords?

By Suren Sargsyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Despite the fact that several months ago US President Donald J. Trump's adviser Steven Witkoff stated that Armenia and Azerbaijan could potentially join the Abraham Accords, it remains unclear how Armenia — a country with a 98 percent Christian population — could become part of these agreements.

One of the Trump administration initiatives in the Middle East, the so-called Abraham Accords seek to establish avenues of cooperation between Islamic countries and Israel, with the broader objective of promoting peace and prosperity across the region. These accords were originally formulated during the first administration of President Trump, with the aim of normalizing Israel's relations with states that had historically maintained hostile or adversarial positions toward it. The initial phase of this process unfolded in 2020, when Israel established normalized relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, through the mediation of the United States.

The principal architect of this initiative was Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law, who served as the chief negotiator. Following Trump's electoral defeat in 2020, momentum behind these agreements declined, and Washington's broader foreign policy approach toward Israel experienced a degree of recalibration. Trump's return to the political arena in 2024, however, signaled a potential revival of the Abraham Accords, though within an expanded framework — one that envisions either the normalization of relations between Israel and a broader range of Islamic countries or the deepening of already existing ties.

While the Abraham Accords were originally intended to normalize relations between Israel and Arab states, one of their subsequent objectives became the normalization and deepening of Israel's relations with Muslim-majority countries outside of the Middle East, in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Good examples of such target countries are Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, which both expressed interest in joining the initiative.

Azerbaijan's potential participation would be largely symbolic in nature. Relations between Israel and Azerbaijan are already strategic. Azerbaijan purchases billions of dollars' worth of weapons from Israel in exchange for oil and gas. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1992 and have remained at a high level ever since. Therefore, Azerbaijan's interest in joining the Abraham Accords is driven primarily by a desire to gain political credit with the Trump administration and to establish additional channels of engagement with the United States and the Trump team. The relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan is already so close that many allied and partner countries could envy it. Azerbaijan's possible accession to the Abraham Accords is unlikely to further "warm" this already exceptionally close partnership.

Baku is driven by a desire to develop closer relations with the United States in order to pursue a more independent policy vis-à-vis Moscow. Through this step, Azerbaijan seeks to balance its political relationship with Russia on the one hand, while on the other minimizing potential pressure related to human rights issues coming from the US. At the same time, Azerbaijan aims to reduce the risks of pressure and possible sanctions resulting from Armenian lobbying efforts in Washington DC.

On the Azerbaijani domestic front, the formation of strategic

relations with the Trump administration holds particular significance, as US-Azerbaijan relations were strained during the years of the Biden administration, which in turn had an impact on Azerbaijan's internal political dynamics. From Washington's perspective, Azerbaijan as the wealthiest country in the South Caucasus is an important partner both in terms of energy resources and in balancing Russian influence in the region. Azerbaijan is a direct neighbor of Russia and, as demonstrated over the past years, it has the capacity to create various challenges for Moscow, as seen in the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh and the tensions that arose following the downing of an Azerbaijani aircraft. Moreover, by reinforcing the role of Turkey, the leading power among the Turkic states, along with its ally Azerbaijan and other Turkic countries in the region, Washington is creating an additional counterbalancing force against Russia and China, while at the same time keeping its strategic ally and NATO member, Turkey, within its sphere of influence.

For Armenia, rather than Azerbaijan, joining the Abraham Accords, appears largely logical, given the historically strained



AZERBAIJAN'S INTEREST IN JOINING THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS IS DRIVEN PRIMARILY BY A DESIRE TO GAIN POLITICAL CREDIT WITH THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND TO ESTABLISH ADDITIONAL CHANNELS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED STATES AND THE TRUMP TEAM.

relations between Armenia and Israel, driven by the strategic nature of Azerbaijani-Israeli ties, Armenia's friendly relations with Iran, and the ongoing issues created by Israeli authorities concerning Armenian historical and cultural heritage in Jerusalem. Thus, it cannot be ruled out that Armenia would join the Abraham Accords if Washington suggested such an idea. Such a scenario could become possible if the logic of the Abraham Accords were to expand beyond the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab or Muslim-majority states and begin to include certain Christian countries as well. For now, official Yerevan appears to be maintaining a wait-and-see position.

It cannot be ruled out that when Witkoff made his statement, he did not mean that Armenia and Azerbaijan should join the Abraham Accords for the purpose of resolving the conflict between them. What was important here was that Israel, a strategic ally of the United States, should have as few problems as possible not only with Arab countries, but also with Islamic and non-Islamic states. Washington needs to demonstrate that not only Arab, but also Turkic states, such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, are willing to deepen relations with Israel, the ultimate goal of which appears to be the reconciliation of Israel and Turkey.

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COMMENTARY

MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

Can Pashinyan Do for Armenia a Fraction of What Erdogan Has Done For Turkey?

I just read an in-depth investigation published by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) titled, “Behind Trump’s Turkish ‘Bromance’: Oligarchs, Crooks, and a Multi-Million-Dollar Lobbying Deal.” The authors are Aubrey Belford and Adam Klasfeld.

The first paragraph summarizes the findings: “Turkey’s president has enjoyed an unusually powerful sway over the Trump administration. A new investigation reveals the relationship was built by a circle that included Trump’s favorite lobbyist, a key character in the Ukraine impeachment scandal, a Kremlin-linked oligarch, and a shipping tycoon charged with terrorism.”

The article discloses the private lunch held at Washington’s Watergate Hotel on January 19, 2017, the day before Trump’s inauguration. It was attended by four key individuals: Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu; Brian Ballard, a lobbyist and vice chairman of Trump’s inaugural committee; Lev Parnas, a Ukrainian-born major donor to pro-Trump causes who set up the meeting, along with Mubariz Mansimov, a Turkish-Azerbaijani shipping magnate, who according to Parnas, donated a \$25-million oil tanker to the Turkish president’s family and allowed Erdogan to use his private plane. He is now on trial in Turkey, accused of terrorism.

On the meeting’s agenda was “two multi-million-dollar contracts to lobby for Turkey and its Islamist leader, Erdogan, in the US,” according to OCCRP.

Most of the middlemen between Erdogan and Trump are businessmen and oligarchs tied to former Soviet Republics — “and almost all of them are now either in jail or facing serious criminal charges.... The lobbying contracts with Ballard were established with the help of both Parnas and the shipping tycoon Mansimov, as well as Farkhad Akhmedov, who is listed by the US Treasury as a Russian oligarch closely tied to Russian President Vladimir Putin.... The contracts eventually included a \$125,000-per-month deal for Ballard’s firm to represent Halkbank, a Turkish state bank being prosecuted in the U.S. for fraud, money laundering and sanctions-busting, public records show. Trump has reportedly tried to quash the Halkbank case,” OCCRP reported.

The Ballard contracts were preceded by “widely reported efforts in which Turkish businessmen and ministers illegally hired Trump’s former national security advisor, retired Gen. Mike Flynn, as a lobbyist, and discussed a \$10 million influence campaign with another Trump adviser.”

In a strange twist, OCCRP reported that Mansimov and another businessman were partners with an Armenian-American convicted in the US of a \$511-million fraud scheme. An IRS agent “alleged in court that the fraudsters were directly linked to Erdogan and had bought the protection of Turkey’s government.”

Parnas said he was introduced to Mansimov by Belarusian-born Igor Furman “who had worked with Giuliani on his Ukraine dirt-digging missions.” Parnas said he got two free tickets from Ballard to attend Trump’s inauguration balls with Mansimov. Ballard Partners denied the claim.

Two days after Trump’s inauguration, Akhmedov, an Azeri oligarch, arrived in Miami with his 385-foot yacht, the Luna, the world’s second-largest. “Akhmedov has publicly claimed to have helped resolve international disputes between Turkey and Russia at least twice. In a 2016 interview with Russian state media outlet Sputnik, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu described Akhmedov as a valuable diplomatic go-between....” OCCRP reported. He also mediated between the US and Turkey.

On May 11, 2017, “Ballard Partners signed its first Turkey-related lobbying contract, with the country’s government.... The second contract, with Halkbank was signed in August. Combined, the two contracts brought in more than \$4 million. (Ballard terminated the contract with the Turkish government on November 15, 2018, a few days after the Trump administration gave sanctions relief, letting Erdogan’s regime purchase oil from Iran. The firm’s Halkbank contract was terminated in October 2019, after the bank was indicted by US federal prosecutors),” OCCRP reported. “Text messages also show that Akhmedov played a role in discussions over a later Ballard Partners contract, signed in April 2018, to lobby on behalf of Azerbaijan’s authoritarian government for \$50,000 per month. Ballard Partners denies this claim.”

“In early 2017, it had been revealed that Trump’s former national security adviser Mike Flynn — who was forced to resign on February 13 that year over undeclared contacts with Russia’s ambassador to the U.S. — had been secretly hired as an undeclared foreign agent by Erdogan’s government. American federal prosecutors have since indicted a Turkish-Dutch businessman, Ekim Alptekin, over his alleged role in the scheme, which involved fun-

neling over \$500,000 in Turkish government money to Flynn’s consultancy. Prosecutors allege the scheme was directed by two Turkish ministers. Lobbying documents show they were Foreign Minister Cavusoglu and Erdogan’s son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, who at the time was energy minister. As part of that effort, Flynn and those same Turkish figures also discussed kidnapping Erdogan’s cleric rival, [Fethullah] Gulen, from his home in Pennsylvania and ‘whisking’ him to Turkey to face charges, former C.I.A. Director Michael Woolsey, who was at the September 2016 meeting, told the Wall Street Journal. Flynn has denied the report,” according to OCCRP.

“In a meeting on September 20, 2016, Woolsey, then also a Trump campaign adviser, said he met Alptekin and his close associate, Sezgin Baran Korkmaz, to unsuccessfully pitch his own \$10-million plan to help Turkey by discrediting Gulen. Korkmaz faces allegations that he played a key role in a half-billion-dollar fraud scheme orchestrated by Lev Aslan Dermen, an Armenian-American organized-crime figure. Dermen was convicted earlier this year, and was alleged in court proceedings to be personally linked with Erdogan. Also closely tied to the two men was Mansimov.... At the time they were involved in brokering US-Turkey relations, both Mansimov and Korkmaz were also partners in business with the Armenian-American organized crime figure. Dermen, who also goes by the name Levon Termendzhyan, was convicted in March over a complex fraud carried out with members of The Order, a secretive Mormon polygamist sect, to defraud the U.S. government by claiming over \$500 million in fake renewable-fuel tax credits. Based in Los Angeles, Dermen owned a fleet of luxury cars, traveled with bodyguards, and used bribery to recruit moles in the police, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and, allegedly, the F.B.I. Korkmaz, the Turkish businessman, allegedly helped the group move over \$130 million to Turkey, where both he and Dermen had cultivated links with Erdogan, I.R.S. agent Tyler Hatcher testified during a pre-trial hearing. Dermen and Korkmaz ‘have used their wealth to ensure that their money would be a safe haven in Turkey as well as protect them against extradition,’ Hatcher said,” according to OCCRP.

“Daniel McDyre, a former subordinate of Dermen who has since turned state’s witness, told reporters that the company was an aborted joint venture between Mansimov and Dermen to pursue a crude-oil shipping deal with the Turkish government.... Dermen is now facing up to 30 years in prison,” OCCRP reported.

As a result of the Erdogan-Trump connection, the “Trump administration has often been strikingly receptive to the interests of Erdogan’s authoritarian government.” Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, wrote in his memoir that “the U.S. president seemed, despite a rocky bilateral relationship, to regard the Turkish leader as one of his ‘best international buddies,’” OCCRP reported.

“Records filed under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act show that Turkey’s government and related agencies

spent more than \$7.3 million on five US lobbying firms in 2018 alone. Apart from Ballard, one major beneficiary has been Mercury Public Affairs, another outfit that enjoys close links to the [Trump] administration,” OCCRP reported. Mercury was hired earlier this year by the Armenian Government for \$600,000 a year.

Another close contact with Trump is Turkish businessman Mehmet Ali Yalcindag, the president of the Turkish-US Business Council, “a semi-official Turkish entity.” He is now “under indictment for his alleged role in secretly recruiting Flynn,” according to OCCRP. Yalcindag “partnered with the U.S. president in the Trump Towers Istanbul project.... Yalcindag reportedly enjoys a close relationship with the Trump family.”

According to Bolton, Erdogan asked Trump to drop “the prosecution of Ballard’s client, Halkbank. The case, which involved laundering billions of dollars out of Iran in violation of US sanctions, implicates Erdogan and his finance minister son-in-law, Albayrak. Bolton described one incident where Erdogan handed Trump a dossier from the Halkbank’s lawyers absolving it of any wrongdoing. According to Bolton, Trump flipped through the document before declaring, he believed it.”

In a text message exchange between Mansimov and Parnas on January 22, 2017, Mansimov says that the main goal of Ballard’s lobbying is the trial of Turkish-Iranian money launderer Reza Zarrab. Bolton wrote that Trump “told Erdogan he would take care of things, explaining that the Southern District [of New York] prosecutors were not his people, but were Obama people, a problem that would be fixed when they were replaced by his people.”

In another indication of the close link between the Presidents of the U.S. and Turkey, Trump suddenly announced he was approving the Turkish invasion of northern Syria after getting a phone call from Erdogan.

Carl Bernstein, a veteran US journalist, “reported in June that Erdogan has enjoyed a level of telephone access to the US president unrivaled by any other foreign leader. ‘By far the greatest number of Trump’s telephone discussions with an individual head of state was with Erdogan, who sometimes phoned the White House at least twice a week and was put through directly to the president on standing orders from Trump,’” Bernstein wrote.

Can Pashinyan do for Armenia a small fraction of what Erdogan has done for Turkey, rather than wasting time on disputes with the Catholicos and the Armenian Apostolic Church?

“THE U.S. PRESIDENT SEEMED, DESPITE A ROCKY BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, TO REGARD THE TURKISH LEADER AS ONE OF HIS ‘BEST INTERNATIONAL BUDDIES,’”

Armenians Should Demand Rubio Apply New Nigeria Visa Policy to Azerbaijan

By Michael Rubin
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

As Christians come under increasing siege in Nigeria, the Trump administration is responding as President Joe Biden’s team never did on Nagorno-Karabakh. On December 3, 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio tweeted, “The United States is taking decisive action in response to the atrocities and violence against Christians in Nigeria and around the world. The @StateDept will restrict U.S. visas for those who knowingly direct, authorize, fund, support, or carry out violations of religious freedom. This visa policy applies to Nigeria and other governments or individuals that persecute people for their religious beliefs.”

Rubio’s tweet marks a reversal of US policy on Nigeria. Nigeria is home to the world’s sixth largest Christian popula-

tion, although for decades Nigerian Islamists have besieged the community. The Nigerian government starved more than two million Christians to death during the 1967-1970 Biafra Genocide and then rewarded Muhammadu Buhari, one of its perpetrators by propelling him to the presidency twice. While Nigeria points to the religious protections granted in its constitution, 12 northern states have now imposed Islamic law on their subjects. As Fulani militiamen stormed Christian villages and slaughtered their inhabitants, Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s dismissed the religious angle, blaming the movement of the Islamist tribesmen on climate change. Climate change, however, did not charter their buses; Nigerian officials did. As Nigeria ramped up its slaughter of Christians, Blinken announced Nigeria’s removal from the religious freedom watch list. Months

later, the White House posted a photograph of Biden and Buhari laughing and joking as they watched the 2022 FIFA World Cup together. Biden and Blinken sought to give Nigeria a pass on religious repression in the hope that kind words and relaxed diplomacy might lead to warm relations; neither president nor secretary understood that ideology motivated Nigeria’s Islamists and that they brokered no compromise.

Today, at least, these Islamists cannot enter the United States or in many cases access its financial system. Nigeria, however, is hardly the only country to repress its Christians and seek to drive them into exile.

Azerbaijan uses its caviar diplomacy to buy allies in Congress, universities, think tanks, and newspapers. They repeat talking points about Azerbaijan’s religious tolerance. Shortly after Azerbaijan ethnically cleansed Nagorno-Karabakh, for exam-

ple, Mordechai Kedar took to the Jerusalem Post to describe Azerbaijan as “a peace-loving country...which promotes religious tolerance and pluralism for all of its citizens.” After a brief trip to Azerbaijan, Los Angeles Rabbi David Wolpe related how one interlocutor hoped that “the cooperation of Christians, Muslims, Jews and other traditions in Azerbaijan might serve as a model for other nations.” Though later pardoned by President Donald Trump, a US court convicted Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Texas) of taking bribes in exchange for parroting Azerbaijani talking points.

In reality, there is little religious freedom in Azerbaijan. The regime trots out Jewish and Christian leaders, but these are little more than living museum exhibits who follow a script under threat of their or their families’ lives.

Azerbaijan displayed its real attitude toward Christians when it destroyed thousands of khachkars [cross stones] in the ancient graveyard at Julfa, dynamited churches during its assault on Shushi, sandblasted centuries-old inscriptions, and promoted the ahistorical, state-sponsored calumny of the persistence of the Albanian church to justify confiscation of Armenian churches and

IN REALITY, THERE IS LITTLE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AZERBAIJAN. THE REGIME TROTS OUT JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN LEADERS, BUT THESE ARE LITTLE MORE THAN LIVING MUSEUM EXHIBITS WHO FOLLOW A SCRIPT UNDER THREAT OF THEIR OR THEIR FAMILIES’ LIVES.

monasteries and. The State Department’s Office of Religious Freedom lists Azerbaijan as a “Special Watch List” country due to concerns about religious repression.

The situation has only worsened with the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh’s indigenous Christian population on the direct orders of President Ilham Aliyev.

Under Rubio’s new policy, neither Aliyev, his family members, nor top Azerbaijani officials should any longer qualify for US visas; neither for that matter should Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, given his role overseeing the continuing repression of Armenians and Armenian religious freedom inside Turkey.

Rubio’s tweet could be a positive first step to make respect for religious freedom a precondition to qualify for US visas, but unless members of the Armenian Caucus from across the partisan spectrum hold the current and future State Department administrations to their word, then Rubio’s new policy becomes not a defense of religious freedom but virtue signaling whose empty enforcement convinces those like Aliyev and Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu that they have a greenlight for murder. Rubio has taken the first step, but the ball is now with the Armenian American community to ensure he applies the policy broadly to protect all Christians, from Biafra to Baku.

(Michael Rubin is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and director of policy analysis at the Middle East Forum.)



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