

# Refugees Try To Make a New Life in Svarants

By Marut Vanyan  
*Special to the Mirror-Spectator*



Bella, at left, Uliyana, center, and her daughter, in Svarants (Marut Vanyan photo)



New homes built by the Tufenkian Foundation in Svarants (Marut Vanyan photo)



Uliyana and the picture of Virgin Mary she took from her home. (Marut Vanyan photo)

SVARANTS, Armenia — On a recent Sunday morning, a woman receives a blessing from a priest at the Tatev Monastery, the walls echoing with the Surb Surb hymn. Someone else is there with his son light a candle. The cable car passes through a blue winter sky, which immediately reminds one of Ruben Vardanyan, who financed this project. Next to the church, dehydrated fruits and herbs such as thyme, chamomile and rose hip teas, honey, knitted toys, and various souvenirs are sold.

In another corner, a woman is repairing the priest’s vest. The priest didn’t dare to throw it away because it was a gift and he asked this woman to repair it.

Knowing that I wasn’t a tourist, she didn’t offer me any shopping but suggested to catch up with Dmitri, who sells almost the same things next to her, but Dmitri’s stall is poor. I have known him since childhood; he was my grandmother’s neighbor in our village in Vaghuhas, Martakert Region, in Artsakh (Karabakh). Now he collects whatever nature offers him from the forests around Tatev and sells them next the church. Although we were talking about other things, it seemed as if we were asking each other with our eyes: “Where we are and why are we ended up here?” Dmitri says he has barely made 1,000 drams a day (\$2) this season and is waiting for the tourist to come in the summer.

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## Ruben Vardanyan’s Charity Sued By Armenian Pro-Government Mayor

By Karine Simonian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — The pro-government mayor of Dilijan is seeking court permission to terminate long-term lease agreements with the family of Ruben Vardanyan, an Armenian billionaire and philanthropist jailed in Azerbaijan, that has invested millions of dollars in local infrastructure. The reconstruction of a public park in the resort town about 100 kilometers north of Yerevan has been one of the projects financed by the Dilijan Development Foundation (DDF), a charity set up by

Vardanyan and his wife more than a decade ago. As part of that project, the former municipal administration had granted the DDF long-term leases on



Ruben Vardanyan and his wife, Veronika Zonabend in Dilijan, in a photo from 2017

the then-rundown park and an adjacent football stadium.

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## Pashinyan Vows ‘Not to Leave Christ Alone’ In Face of Karekin II’s ‘Sectarianism’

By Arshaluys Barseghyan

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan led a march against Catholicos Karekin II in Yerevan, during which he claimed that the catholicos and his close circle employed “sectarian logic” the same day as Armenia celebrated Christmas, on January 6, on the grounds of the Church of St. Anna in Yerevan.



Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan attending a Christmas liturgy in St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral in Yerevan (official photo)

Ahead of the rally, Pashinyan attended a Christmas liturgy at St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral, the city’s main church, before leading a march from there to St Anna Church.

During the march, Pashinyan was accompanied by his common law wife, Anna Hakobyan, government officials including Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, Defense Minister Suren Papikyan, Parliamentary Speaker Alen Simonyan, and other prominent members of the ruling Civil Contract party.

The march and rally were attended by hundreds of people. There are unconfirmed media reports claiming that administrative resources had been tapped into to mobilize a larger number of attendees.

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A train carrying Azerbaijani gasoline arrives in Armenia, December 19, 2025

## Azerbaijan Makes Second Fuel Shipment to Armenia

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia is importing a second batch of fuel from Azerbaijan in line with recent agreements reached by the governments of the two states, Economy Minister Gevorg Papoyan announced on Friday, January 9.

Papoyan said a train carrying 6,100 tons of Azerbaijani petrol and 1,500 tons of diesel fuel is about to reach Armenia via Georgia.

Azerbaijan already sent a train-

load of 1,300 tons of gasoline less than a month ago, the first shipment of its kind carried in line with understandings reached by Armenian and Azerbaijani deputy prime ministers in November.

The shipment was granted a one-off exemption from Georgian transit fees. At least half of it was purchased by a company belonging to Khachatur Sukiasyan, a wealthy businessman close to the Arme-

nian government, and distributed, at a below-market price, through a gas station chain also controlled by him. The other wholesale buyer is formally owned by a young man related to another tycoon, Samvel Aleksanian.

Papoyan said on January 8 that the same two companies will also buy the second batch of fuel. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told

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## NEWS from ARMENIA

## US Halts Green Card Lottery Visa Processing

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — The U.S. State Department has suspended the issuance of immigrant visas under the Diversity Visa Program (commonly known as the Green Card lottery), according to a statement from the U.S. Embassy in Armenia on January 13.

“We will dedicate time and necessary resources to protect the national and public security of the United States. There are currently no new announcements regarding the DV-2027 program,” the statement reads.

## Mirzoyan Thanks Ambassador for Contribution to Armenia-US Relations

YEREVAN (News.am) — Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan received US Ambassador Kristina Kvien this week on the occasion of the completion of her diplomatic mission in Armenia.

The results of the joint work carried out in recent years were highlighted, thanks to which the establishment of strategic partnership between Armenia and the US and its continued development became possible.

Among other programs, the two touched upon the measures being taken to implement the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) project.

Mirzoyan thanked Kvien for her contribution to the strengthening of Armenia-US bilateral relations.

## Criminal Case Launched over Threat Against Catholicos

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — A criminal investigation was launched on January 12 following a public statement made against Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II. The comment was made by an attendee during a liturgy in the courtyard of Garni Church, which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan attended.

According to Sputnik Armenia, the case concerns an incident on December 28, when a journalist asked one of the attendees, “What would it take for Patriarch Nersisyan to resign?” The person replied, “Someone should hit him on the head with a rock and kill him.”

On December 29, the Prosecutor’s Office confirmed it was reviewing the statement.

“On January 7, 2026, a criminal case was initiated under Article 330, Part 2, Clause 3 of the Criminal Code (public incitement to violence using mass media or information and communication technologies),” the Prosecutor’s Office stated.

According to media reports, the individual who made the comment is Edward Stepanyan, an employee of the local utility service under the Garni municipality, responsible for water meter maintenance.

## Yerevan Accused of Inaction on Karabakh Armenian Jailed in Azerbaijan

By Naira Bulghadarian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia’s government remains reluctant to provide lawyers representing an ethnic Armenian resident of Nagorno-Karabakh jailed by Azerbaijan with medical records which they say could facilitate his release from prison.

called video evidence of Avanesyan’s preparations for the attack. The footage shot in Stepanakert showed him walking not towards that site but in the opposite direction. Nor did he carry any weapons.

An Azerbaijani court sentenced Avanesyan to 16 years in prison on December 25 at the end of what human rights lawyers in Armenia condemned as a sham trial.



Karabakh Armenian Karen Avanesyan stands trial in a Ganja court

The 58-year-old Karen Avanesyan is one of a handful of Karabakh Armenians who did not flee to Armenia during Azerbaijan’s September 2023 military offensive that restored Azerbaijani control over the region. Avanesyan was arrested by Azerbaijani security services last September for allegedly plotting a “terrorist” attack on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. They claimed that he opened fire from an automatic assault rifle and threw hand grenades while approaching the site of an event in Stepanakert attended by Aliyev.

The authorities released what they

Citing Karabakh’s former health authorities, they say that he suffers from a serious mental illness and should not have been put on trial in the first place.

Some of those lawyers made this argument in a lawsuit filed with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The Strasbourg court responded by demanding documentary evidence of Avanesyan’s medical condition.

Avanesyan’s medical records were transported to Armenia and handed over to the country’s Health Ministry during the 2023 exodus of Karabakh’s popula-

tion. Citing privacy grounds, the ministry refused late last year to give the lawyers a copy of those documents.

Over two weeks ago, they also asked a psychiatric clinic in Yerevan to clarify whether it has any documentary information about Avanesyan’s health problems.

“We have still not received a reply,” one of the lawyers, Anastasia Makaryan, told RFE/RL’s Armenian Service on Tuesday, January 13.

Makaryan said that the data sought by her and her colleagues could convince the ECHR to demand Avanesyan’s release from an Azerbaijani prison.

“If a person has problems with mental health, then their imprisonment is very controversial,” she explained.

Artak Beglaryan, a former Karabakh premier also involved in the legal action in Strasbourg, deplored the “criminal inaction” of the Armenian health authorities. He suggested that they are acting unprofessionally, do not care about Avanesyan’s fate or simply follow the Armenian government policy of “turning a blind eye to the violation of Artsakh Armenians’ rights by Azerbaijan.”

Beglaryan said the lawyers may now have to ask the ECHR to demand such information from the authorities in Yerevan.

“But God knows when that [court order] will come and what this criminal inactivity will lead to,” he said. “Karen Avanesyan may, for example, be killed in prison in the meantime.”

The Armenian government has still not officially reacted to the prison sentence given to Avanesyan. The office of its representative to the ECHR declined to comment this week on the lawyers’ appeal to the Strasbourg court, saying that it has not been officially notified about the case.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s administration has also been accused by its domestic critics of doing little to try to ensure the release of at least 23 other Armenian captives held in Azerbaijan. It denies the accusations.

## Pashinyan Vows ‘Not to Leave Christ Alone’ in Face of Karekin II’s ‘Sectarianism’

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During his speech at the rally, Pashinyan denied the accusations that his government was acting against the Church, instead saying that it followed the same doctrines as the Church.

In turn, Pashinyan accused unnamed figures of attempting to use the Armenian Apostolic Church as a “foothold” to act against Armenia, calling those who allowed it to happen to be using sectarian logic. Pashinyan added that he would not allow that to happen as an elected leader.

“Today, essentially, we must acknowledge that the Church’s de facto leader and his elite, the narrow circle he has formed, are within a sectarian logic, in a schism. This means that we must free our Church [...] from the schism; we must return the Church to the people,” Pashinyan said.

Calling it a “grave mistake” that they left the Church and Christ alone with what he described as a ‘schism,’ Pashinyan said that “the Church is not alone, and the state is not alone, because the Church and the state are now together”.

This statement appears to contradict the constitution of Armenia, which describes the country as a secular state where “religious organizations shall be separate from

the state”.

Pashinyan also called on people to attend liturgies and urge priests to join his “reform” of the Church.

On the same day, Catholicos Karekin II reiterated that the Church “continues to be subjected to oppression”.

“This situation is a serious blow to the authority of our nation and state and a deep wound inflicted upon communities and believers,” Karekin II said in his Christmas message. He added that despite all, that the Church “remains firm and unshaken”.

Pashinyan’s Church ‘Reform’

The march was announced by Pashinyan a day earlier, calling on citizens to join the march intended to mark Christmas. However, it also carried a political agenda.

The attendees were meant to show support for the Church reform initiative Pashinyan launched on Sunday and to protest what Pashinyan described as the use of the Armenian Church “as a tool of hybrid warfare by foreign forces” by Karekin II and his close circle.

The statement announcing the launch of the reform was signed on Sunday by Pashinyan and the 10 senior clergy members who had called for the resignation of the catholicos.

A day after the publication of the statement, the acting head of the Armenian Diocese of Switzerland, Proto-Archimandrite Goossan Aljanian, joined the statement, bringing the total of signatory priests to 11.

Pashinyan has doubled down on toppling Karekin II months before 2026 elections scheduled to be held in June, amid the ongoing high-tension between the Armenian government and the Church, which aligns more with the opposition.

Tensions between the government and the Church reached their peak in late May 2025, with Pashinyan accusing Catholicos Karekin II and other senior clergy of breaking their celibacy vows, rendering them ineligible for office.

The most serious allegation, however, remains Pashinyan’s claim that Karekin II and his brother, Archbishop Yezras of the Diocese of New Nakhichevan and Russia, maintain ties with foreign intelligence services.

As of January, four high-ranking priests have been detained on various charges.

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## ARMENIA

# Vardanyan's Charity Sued By Pro-Government Mayor

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The charity has renovated the park since 2016, building modern sports and recreation facilities there and turning it into one of Dilijan's main tourist attractions. It claims to have spent more than \$5 million of its own funds in addition to funding provided by the European Union and a German development agency. In 2023, the DDF asked the current local council to approve the next stage of the comprehensive reconstruction planned by it. The council controlled by Armenia's ruling Civil Contract party has still not discussed the plan. It has given no reasons for the delay. It emerged recently that the Dilijan municipality has sued the DDF, accusing it of not honoring its contractual obligations and asking an Armenian court to terminate the lease agreements. Dilijan Mayor Davit Sargsyan refused to specify the alleged breach of contract when he spoke to RFE/RL's Armenian Service on Wednesday, January 7. Nor did he say why the local council did not greenlight the park's further reconstruction.

"If a state institution appeals to the court, then [its claims are] not unfounded," said the mayor affiliated with Civil Contract.

In a recent interview with the Mediamax news agency, Vardanyan's Russian-born wife, Veronika Zonabend, deplored the legal action linked by some Armenian commentators to her husband's criticism of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan which continued even after his September 2023 capture by Azerbaijan.



The UWC Dilijan College's main campus

"This, of course, creates problems for us," said Zonabend. "But what is worse is that this is also a very bad signal for private investors and social entrepreneurs because an unfavorable investment and social environment is being formed [in Dilijan,] with personal relationships with the municipal-

ity and private interests of some officials taking precedence over the law and objective standards that protect rights."

She also stressed that her husband, who made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s, and his international partners have invested as much as \$236 million in various projects in and around Dilijan designed to promote tourism, education and environmental activism.

Those include the opening of an international high school which is part of the British-based United World Colleges (UWC) network. Pashinyan visited the school and described it as a "center of inspiration, enthusiasm and optimism" just days after coming to power in 2018.

Vardanyan became openly critical of Pashinyan after moving to Nagorno-Karabakh to take up the second highest post in the region's leadership in November 2022. The tycoon held it until February 2023.

Vardanyan as well as seven other former Karabakh Armenian leaders were captured by Azerbaijan during its September 2023 military offensive that forced Karabakh's entire population to flee to Armenia and restored Azerbaijani control over the territory. They went on trial in Baku a year

ago on charges denied by them. Vardanyan remained particularly defiant just as an Azerbaijani prosecutor demanded a life sentence for him last month.

Pashinyan was accused by his domestic critics of helping Baku legitimize Vardanyan's continuing imprisonment with his scathing comments about the tycoon made in August 2024. Speaking during a news conference, the Armenian premier wondered who had told Vardanyan to renounce Russian citizenship and move to Karabakh and "for what purpose."

He seemed to echo Azerbaijani leaders' earlier claims that Vardanyan was dispatched to Karabakh by Moscow to serve Russian interests there. Vardanyan hit back at Pashinyan in a September 2024 statement issued by his family.

In another statement circulated in March 2025, Vardanyan criticized the Armenian government's appeasement policy towards Azerbaijan and accused it of spreading hate speech against the Karabakh Armenians. His American lawyer, Jared Genser, has repeatedly said that Pashinyan is doing little to secure the release of at least 23 Armenian prisoners held in Azerbaijan.



Children play in the Dilijan park.

## US Tariffs on Iran Raise Questions over Impact on Armenia's Trade Relations

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — Recent developments surrounding Iran have prompted renewed concern over their potential impact on Armenia's economic relations with both Tehran and Washington, as the United States moves to impose new trade restrictions.

US President Donald Trump announced this week that countries engaging in trade with the Islamic Republic of Iran will face a 25 percent tariff. The decision was made public via social media, where Trump stated that the measure is final and not subject to appeal.

Iran is one of only two countries with which Armenia shares an open land border, and trade between Yerevan and Tehran has been steadily expanding in recent years. At the same time, Armenia has been developing closer relations with the United States, raising questions about how the latest US measures could affect the country's eco-

nomic positioning.

According to official data, Armenian-Iranian trade turnover reached \$748 million in 2024. Growth continued in the first half of 2025, surpassing \$340 million. Armenian officials expect bilateral trade to first exceed \$1 billion and eventually reach \$3 billion.

Speaking at an Armenian-Iranian business forum held in Yerevan in August 2025, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said trade between the two countries has shown consistent growth in recent years.

"Imports from Iran have increased by more than 10 percent year on year, reaching \$300 million," Pashinyan said. "As for exports, despite a slight decline, they continue to include electricity, copper concentrate and agricultural products."

Economist Agasi Tavadyan, an expert at the Amberd Research Center, told Public Radio of Armenia that despite growth,

trade volumes remain relatively modest given Armenia's limited access to open borders.

"Iran is essentially one of Armenia's two open gateways. Armenia primarily imports gas and exports electricity. In this sense, Iran functions as a 'battery' for Armenia — when we have surplus electricity, we sell it to Iran," Tavadyan explained.

He added that exports of other goods have also expanded in recent years, recalling the agreement on the establishment of a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union. However, Tavadyan warned that certain exports — such as livestock and cheese — may become more difficult due to the depreciation of the Iranian rial, which has driven up prices.

As for imports from Iran, including cement and other construction materials, Tavadyan said no major changes are expected. He noted that Armenia's government has re-

peatedly applied restrictions and quotas on such imports to protect domestic producers.

Trade between Armenia and the United States remains limited, although it has shown steady growth. Since 2020, bilateral trade has more than tripled, from \$96 million to approximately \$350 million.

"Trade volumes with Iran and the US are at roughly comparable levels, around 3 percent," Tavadyan said. "In fact, trade with the US is even lower. The issue here is geopolitical rather than purely economic, as the US is one of the world's most influential global actors."

Meanwhile, anti-government protests in Iran have continued for more than two weeks. On December 28, merchants at Tehran's main bazaar closed their shops in protest against the country's worsening economic situation. Demonstrations later spread to other major cities and gradually took on a political dimension.





ARMENIA

# Refugees Try to Make a New Life in Svarants

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The knitting woman suspects that refugees from Artsakh will not settle in Svarants village, located 4 kilometers from the Tatev Monastery in Syunik Province. “Who will agree to live there?” she asks with a sigh.

## Uliyana

“When we forced to left Karabakh in 2023, my husband decided: ‘We’ll make a quick stop in Armenia and move to Russia, it’s nonnegotiable.’ But the people welcomed us here so warmly that we decided to stay. My husband even ‘went spying’ there, but when he returned, he said, ‘no, it’s not a place to live there.’ Anyway, many from my fellow villagers have left for Russia. Some are coming back, others are staying. Russia is not what it was before the war in Ukraine. That’s why many are returning. What should they do, go from one war to another? I personally know that two families from my native village have returned,” said Uliyana from Maghavuz, Martakert, whose family settled in Svarants, part of the Tatev community.

Currently, her family is renting a rural house in Svarants, but Uliana says that it’s musty inside and wants to move to a new house built by the Tufenkian Foundation. “It’s so humid here that the lids on the jars of jam I canned for the winter are rusting” she said.

In Svarants, next to the derelict houses with the rickety fences, the Tufenkian Foundation has built 10 new once, which already shine in front of you from the dirt road leading to the village, but up close you can see that the houses are still unfurnished.

“There is a plot of land in front of it where we can plant vegetables, hoe, sow, as we did in Maghavuz. Basically, this is going to be a new neighborhood and I’m a little excited about who my new neighbors will be. However, I understand that not everyone can live a rural life. Half of the Karabakh population lived in the capital Stepanakert, worked in banks, pharmacies or state offices. Therefore, the majority today prefers to live in Yerevan, hoping to get a job in their profession,” she added.

The housing issue remains the most vital and urgent for Karabakh Armenians. On December 16 last year, a draft resolution was discussed at a session of the Armenian Parliament to approve a \$250 million loan agreement with the Asian Development Bank, which is supposed to solve the housing issue of Karabakh refugees. During the session it became known that 26,000 Artsakh Armenians got new Armenian passports, although they all hold the same Armenian passport with the 070 code. However, the Armenian government considers the passports of Artsakh Armenians to be a travel document only.

Three thousand and eight hundred families applied for housing certificates, but only 1,600 families (6 percent) have been able to purchase an apartment so far.

Thus, Artsakh Armenians are forced to exchange their blue passport for another blue one, where the 070 code is changed to 099, facing bureaucratic and psychological difficulties. “I just got my ‘new’ passport. Please do not congratulate me. The process took more than four months. My parents are still waiting, although they registered in the passport office on the same date as I,” said Svetlana, a former resident of Stepanakert.

Sputnik Armenian reports about 5,500 applications from former Artsakh citizens have been rejected.

“A total of 9,284 families have submitted applications within the framework of the state support program for housing for fam-

ilies forcibly displaced from Artsakh. This was reported by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Armenia in response to a written request from Sputnik Armenia. The main reasons for rejection are the absence of data on the applicant or any family member in the database of forcibly displaced persons registered by the Migration and Citizenship Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia after September 27, 2020 and September 19, 2023,” the report noted.

According to the Armenian National Security Service statistics, around 16,000 Artsakh Armenians have left Armenia since 2023 (most, it is assumed, for Russia), while Artsakh Ombudsman Gegham Stepanyan states that the number is at least 24,000 and probably much higher.

Meanwhile, the profile of the capital Stepanakert has almost completely changed today. Now calling it Khankendi, Azerbaijanis are demolishing entire neighborhoods, painting the buildings white, and populating them within the framework of the “great return” program. In principle, Stepanakert



Knitting in Svarants (Marut Vanyan photo)

never shone with its architecture, it’s simply typical Soviet architecture city, but in any case, it was the people who made it such a good place to live.

There was an old neighborhood on Tumanian Street, which Azerbaijan demolished and built in its place a “Victory Park,” which Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev officially opened on December 24 (on his birthday). Perhaps it would be better for the Karabakh people if there was no internet and they didn’t see bulldozers demolishing their apartment buildings, where they had lived their entire lives. But what is left for them to do today other than live in rented flats in Armenia or emigrating to Russia and France?

However, what the Armenian government cannot or doesn’t want to do, the Armenian Diaspora is trying to “fix”, which, again, does not solve the problem, but when even one family has a roof over their head, it is already good news.

“The first ten houses we are building for forcibly displaced Artsakhtsi families are nearly complete,” said Tufenkian so Programs Director Hagop Ipdjian as he showed us around. The new neighborhood is being built in Svarants, as part of the Tufenkian Foundation’s “Come to Svarants’ revitalization program,” the Tufenkian Foundation announced in October.

There is a school in the Svarants and Uliyana said that, now it has only around 20-23 students, while the neighboring Tandzatap village has only one student, and sometimes one of Uliyana’s children attends

school there, thus doubling the school population! She added that about 38 families live in Svarants, a number increased by two families from Artsakh. There was a medical center in the village, but the only doctor is now in Yerevan for health issues. The villagers go to nearby Tatev to see a doctor if necessary. Once a week, on Mondays, public transport comes to the village and leaves for Goris. Uliyana says the grocery’s prices are high in the village and they go shopping in Goris.

“The first year, when we arrived here, local NGO’s helped with necessary things and food, the Red Cross, the People in Need helped a lot, now there is not much attention towards the Artsakhtsis and we have to get them ourselves. Cooking oil, sugar, rice, vermicelli, buckwheat — what we need in the kitchen in a nutshell, we buy in Goris” said Uliyana.

A benefactor donated a tractor to the village, which Uliyana’s husband uses. They have 40 livestock. Her fellow villager Bella, who has also decided to live in Svarants permanently, has six. “I’m lucky, I don’t pay

no longer silent, we couldn’t understand who was shooting at whom. We took shelter under a nearby hill because there were no shelters or safe places to hide in the village. They instructed us that we have two hours, to take what we need and leave for Stepanakert. I stood in the middle of the living room, stunned: a newly renovated house, I had everything, but what can I take from all of this? I don’t know why, but I yanked the image of the Virgin Mary off the wall and took it with me. I took this, and another photo of my little one. My husband had a truck, but we couldn’t get it out because there was no fuel, so 9 of us somehow got into a Niva [Russian off-road vehicle] and left. It was real chaos, I couldn’t figure out how to gather the children. My daughter came crying and said that Suzy, her sister, had fallen and broken her leg while running away, and no one was able to another, as everyone was rushing in a panic. We were stuck in those terrible traffic jams for two days until we reached Goris. My body was paralyzed by the terrible road.”

Uliyana and Bella vaguely described the future of Karabakh Armenians. “We don’t know, we can’t speak for the whole population. The reality is they are still living in other people’s houses in Armenia, facing social, psychological and bureaucratic difficulties others are emigrating. I still can’t sort my mother-in-law and father-in-law’s documents. We were so lost that we couldn’t manage to take them with us. We paid 120,000 drams (\$315) to a lawyer so he could deal with the issue, but there is still no result. All of our lives have become difficult. It’s much more difficult for those living in the city. It’s impossible to live and pay rent on a salary,” says Bella.

In April, the Armenian government suspended the housing compensation program for Artsakh Armenians, under which each person was paid 50,000 drams (\$130) per month. Currently, only children and vulnerable groups are paid 30,000 drams (\$78) per month. However, all Karabakh Armenians consider themselves a vulnerable group, because they have all lost everything.

In March, Artsakh Armenians held protests in Yerevan demanding the restoration of this program, but the Armenian government said its clear “no.”

“We haven’t received the children’s money for three months now. I don’t know, Social Affairs Ministry says it was transferred, the bank says there is no money in your account. Usually they transfer 30,000 drams (\$78) for my four children, if they transfer,” Uliyana said sarcastically.

When asked if the Karabakh chapter is closed, as the politicians say, Uliyana became indignant: “How come? As long as Karabakh Armenians are existing, the chapter cannot be closed.” And when asked about the possible return, she shrugged her shoulders: “Maybe by some miracle,” she said. “We will, rain or shine,” Bella’s husband Aram added.

“As for Syunik, they cannot feel it and that is natural, they have not gone through all this, God forbid. We did not believe in this tragic ending either. Who could have imagined that they would take all of Karabakh and deport the entire population, who would have imagined that this day would come?”, Uliyana asked in surprise.

And if you ask children what they remember from Artsakh, it is clear from their faces that they remember their friends, but have forgotten their names. “What else do you remember from Artsakh?”: this was a question for Laura (8 y/o), Bella’s daughter. “My dad’s truck, It was blue,” said Laura as she hid behind her mom.





## INTERNATIONAL

# Israel Is Threatening to Demolish a Popular West Bank Youth Football Pitch

By Lubna Masarwa

BETHLEHEM (Middle East Eye) — Israel is threatening to demolish a refugee camp's popular youth football ground built on land owned by the Armenian church on the outskirts of Bethlehem in the shadow of the West Bank separation wall.

The artificial grass pitch, which was installed in 2021, is regularly played on by youngsters from Aida refugee camp, including girls who have represented the Palestine women's national teams at youth level.

Early one morning in mid December, Israeli soldiers pinned a notice to the gates of the football ground ordering a halt to all activities at the site and warning that it could be demolished because it had been built without the correct permits. A nearby theatre and a garden in the area were served with similar notices.

Muhannad Abu Surour, the director of the sports program at the Aida Youth Centre, told Middle East Eye the notice had been discovered by children arriving early for training.

Abu Surour said: "I was not the one who told the children, the children told me."

"The news spread quickly because of how important the pitch is. The children came to my house, knocking on my door, telling me what happened."

Abu Surour said hundreds of boys and girls aged 6 to 19 are enrolled in the camp's football program.

"The field is important to the children, their families, and to us. It is a space for psychological relief given the difficult circumstances and the security situation in this place.

"And now the occupation says it wants to demolish the field. Where are these children supposed to go? Even the simplest right, to play football, is being taken away."

Surrounded by watchtowers

Covering about half a square kilometer, Aida is currently home to about 7,000 people, including about 2,500 children, living in overcrowded conditions.

The camp was established by the United Nations in 1950 for Palestinians who fled from Jerusalem and Hebron during the Nakba of 1948, when Israeli forces seized lands and displaced hundreds of thousands of people during the conflict that led to the formation of the state of Israel.

The entrance to the camp features a gate with a sculpture of a large key symbolic of Palestinians' right of return to the lands

from which they were expelled.

Surrounded by checkpoints, Israeli military bases and settlements — with seven military watchtowers overlooking the camp — it is frequently raided by Israeli forces and was once described as the most tear-gassed place in the world.

A mural painted on to the tall concrete blocks that loom over the pitch shows two children kicking a football, one of them in the colors of the Chilean football team Club Palestino under a map of the historic territory of Palestine and the slogan "Unity, freedom and justice" in English, Arabic and Spanish.



Aida Youth Centre football field near the West Bank separation wall

Club Palestino, which represents Chile's Palestinian community, earlier this year announced a partnership with the Aida Youth Centre, providing it with football kit and equipment and organizing exchanges between the clubs.

Speaking to Middle East Eye during a training session, Salma Al-Azzam, 17, said the pitch was a vital escape and a "safe space" for children living the camp.

"Life in the camp is complicated, in terms of restrictions, and also because you live so close to your neighbors. There's no privacy. And when you look outside, all you see is the wall around you. It's exhausting," said Azzam.

Azzam said she trained three times a week after school and dreamed of becoming a footballer.

"We were all very upset when we heard about the demolition decision. I was shocked and there was a lump in my throat. We have many good players who deserve a chance."

George Juha, a council member for Bethlehem Municipality, told MEE that the local authority leased the land from the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem but had provided it to Aida's popular committee for use by the camp's children.

The land had been a dirt football pitch long before the current facility was built, he said.

But he said that all land so close to the separation wall was under threat from Israeli demolition orders.

"These areas are basically places we can never make use of because they're attached to the wall. So we thought, through public benefit and playgrounds, maybe our children could use them.

"We made good use of it, but the Israelis don't like good for anyone. They don't want playgrounds, or construction, or anything at all. They don't want any activity on the land."

Juha told MEE that Israel had illegally

taken control of at least 26 dunams (26,000 square meters) belonging to Bethlehem Municipality.

He said the use of this land should be a matter for local officials and not for Israel, and that the municipality had hired lawyers and filed legal challenges but to no avail.

"From a planning and construction perspective, these are the municipality's powers, not Israel's powers," he said.

"Nothing has changed"

Said Al-Azza, the head of Aida's popular committee, told MEE that it was unclear why Israel had decided to demolish the pitch.

When contacted, he said, Israeli authorities had asked to see permissions granted by the Armenian church for the use of its land for the football ground and other facilities.

"We've been working there for years and nothing has changed. Why are they coming now? It's unclear to us," Azza said.

When asked for comment, a spokesperson for the Armenian church told MEE that it had leased land for use by the refugee camp for more than 20 years.

The church officially has property rights to a large area of local land including some inside Israel that is now unreachable on the other side of the separation wall.

The notice, which MEE has seen, states that the site, including the pitch, a concrete stand, and the fence around it, has been developed without a proper permit and in violation of military regulations.

It says a final decision on whether it will be demolished will be taken by the planning committee of the civil administration - the Israeli government entity responsible for governing Israeli-controlled areas of the illegally occupied West Bank.

Israeli authorities did not respond to MEE's request for comment.

Noor Abu Ghuneia, 16, plays for the Ittihad Sports Club and has already represented Palestine internationally at youth level.

She was among a number of local players chosen to play for the national team at the 2024 West Asian Football Championship for girls in Saudi Arabia.

"My family has encouraged me to play since I was very young, and I've always loved it," she said.

"It felt terrible when I heard that they plan to demolish the pitch, because this is the only field we have to play on. We always said that this place is where we train so we can represent Palestine abroad.

"But there are not many open spaces and you won't find another place where a new pitch can be built. So if they demolish it, we won't be able to play."

## INTERNATIONAL

## Families Sheltering in Aleppo's Armenian Church Returning to Homes

YEREVAN (News.am) — The families who found shelter in Aleppo, Syria's Armenian Church due to the clashes in the city are returning to their homes, a clergyman of this church told Armenian News-NEWS.am on January 13.

"The military operations have ended, the situation in the city is currently calm," the clergyman said, and added that life in Aleppo has begun to return to its normal course.

On January 11, the militants of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces withdrew from Aleppo. According to the leader of the Kurdish forces, the decision on a ceasefire and the safe transfer of militants and civilians was made thanks to international mediation.

As a result of the clashes that took place in Aleppo in recent days, 24 people were killed, approximately 130 were injured, and about 150 thousand people were displaced.

## No Information from Armenians in Iran Since January 9

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Armenia's Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs Zareh Sinanyan said that since January 9, there has been no information from Armenians living in Iran, and currently authorities have been unable to establish contact with them, a situation that has caused serious concern, 1lurer.am reports.

Sinanyan stated, "We have had no information since Friday, and at the moment we cannot contact our compatriots in Iran, which worries us greatly. We will continue our efforts to establish contact."

He noted that when a similar situation occurred during the 12day escalation between Israel and Iran, Armenia deployed resources at the border in Meghri and began gathering information through our compatriots crossing the border. "We may need to begin the same process from today there [in Meghri], otherwise, naturally, the information blackout deeply concerns us. We do not have sufficient information to speak about evacuation," he said.

Sinanyan recalled that when the latest phase of the Hamas-Israel confrontation began in 2023, Armenia evacuated a large group of our compatriots from Israel during the first ten days of military actions. "We insisted that it should happen. Once we see that we have relevant information regarding our compatriots in Iran that allows us to make this call, we will do so in the Government. But right now we are very concerned because everything escalated from Friday," he said, recalling that January 9 was the first phase of the most intense clashes, even though protests have been underway for 12-13 days.

## Azerbaijan Makes Second Fuel Shipment to Armenia

FUEL, from page 1

reporters hours later that the Armenian government handpicked them after making sure that they have no problem buying Azerbaijan fuel and facing strong condemnation from Armenian opposition circles.

Pashinyan has repeatedly portrayed the fuel shipments as proof of "peace established between Armenia and Azerbaijan." His domestic maintain that the Azerbaijani government is using them for propaganda purposes.

Earlier in November, Baku allowed Kazakhstan and Russia to export wheat to Armenia through its territory. Papoyan said on Friday that a fresh batch of Russian wheat is now being shipped to Armenia by rail.

Armenia imported 490,000 tons of petrol and other fuel in 2024. About two-thirds of it came from Russia.



# Community News

## Hypertension Effort Aims to Bring Heart Health to Rural Armenia

BOSTON — The Armenian American Medical Association of Boston (AAMA) and the Fund for Armenian Relief (FAR) have banded together to bring heart health to rural citizens of Armenia. The aim is to reduce high blood pressure among residents there, since that condition can lead to heart attacks or strokes.

The Hypertension Management Program in Rural Armenia (in memory of Dr. Aram V. Chobanian) is an initiative by AAMA, which FAR is implementing in collaboration with HENAR (Health Network for Armenia). The program is funded by the Afeyan Family Foundation.

This past September, AAMA board member Dr. Armineh Mirzabegian visited the two clinics where the project is taking place, in Aragatsotn and Syunik provinces.

“We knew cardiovascular mortality is the leading cause of death all over the world and hypertension is the leading reason for cardiovascular illness, and we knew if we worked on



Dr. Armineh Mirzabegian, right, at the clinic in Khndzoresk

this, it would be very impactful,” said Mirzabegian in a recent interview.

She was joined in the interview by Dr. Hambarzum Simonyan, the deputy country director on development and healthcare programs at FAR.

Mirzabegian said, “Worldwide, only 1/5 patients with hypertension have their blood pressure adequately under control (WHO), and in Armenia, studies indicate the control rate to be less than 20 percent.”

Follow-up visits and communications are key. In fact, she noted that institutions in the US that have implemented large-scale hypertension programs can achieve control rates more than 80 percent, such as Kaiser Permanente (CDC).

The inception of the program dates back to 2019, when Dr. Aram Chobanian, the former president of Boston University and a cardiovascular specialist, was alive. Post-COVID, Dr. Noubar Afeyan announced that he would fund an AAMA program in Armenia.

The impetus for the project came from Mirzabegian’s experience with her patients here as a primary care physician. “Blood pressure often increases with age, raising the risk of stroke and heart disease. Controlling

see HYPERTENSION, page 9



Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan

## Armenian Christmas Celebrated at St. Vartan Cathedral

By Stephan S. Nigohosian

NEW YORK — The Armenian Christmas Divine Liturgy on Tuesday, January 6, at St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral, once again united the Armenian Christian family to mark the Feast of the Nativity and Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

As the faithful walked down Second Avenue and neared the edifice, its brilliant golden dome with cross atop rose above the cityscape like a gleaming, welcoming beacon. Newly re-gilded as part of the cathedral’s ongoing interior and exterior restoration project, they reflected light outward, transforming the approach into a moment of spiritual significance. The faithful then entered the sanctuary through the ornate bronze entry doors, crossing the threshold into the sacred space that has symbolized our Armenian Christian faith in Manhattan and the world for nearly six decades.

Also known as the Theophany (Asdvadzahaydnoutiun), or the Feast of the Birth and Manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Armenian Christmas service celebrates the revelation of God to mankind through the blessed nativity. As the congregation rejoiced together, faith united them as one body as the Kingdom of God became present and active within the cathedral. Consistent with the early traditions of Christianity, the mystery of the baptism of Jesus Christ was also commemorated on this day, with a special “Blessing of Water” (Churorhnek) ceremony following the Divine Liturgy.

Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan celebrated the Divine Liturgy before the faithful in the cathedral sanctuary, as well as to a global audience via the livestream broadcast. Bishop Mesrop’s steadfast faith and passion, expressed through both his words and gestures, fostered a powerful spiritual connection that endured throughout the service.

*continued on next page*



Godfather of the Cross Haig Ariyan

## Armenian Heritage Park to Present Virtual Program on Schools & Programs for Children

BOSTON — On Tuesday, February 3, at 7 p.m., the virtual program “Celebrate Armenia! Schools and Programs for Children and Youth” will be held. This virtual program of the Friends of Armenian Heritage Park in partnership with Kamurjner Cultural Connections highlights the schools and programs in Greater Boston offering instruction in the Armenian language, culture, history and the arts during the school year while recognizing their leadership and commitment to excellence.

All are invited to the one hour presentation with the leadership speaking about their respective schools and programs. For the announcement and link to register, visit [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](http://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar).

Cindy Fitzgibbon, WCVB TV Chief Meteorologist, will serve as emcee.

The February 3 virtual program is also offered as a gesture of appreciation to the schools and programs that participated in Celebrate Armenia! held at Armenian Heritage Park on the Greenway, Boston on September 20, 2025 on the occasion of Armenian Independence Day.

The intent of the program is to inform the community and beyond about the Armenian educational and cultural resources available for children and youth in Greater Boston and to provide an opportunity for the leadership of each school and program to introduce their mission and approach.

This virtual program will introduce families, educators and the community to the breadth and depth of the day school, weekend schools and cultural programs that nurture Armenian language, identity, creativity and connections.

The participating schools and programs include the day school: St. Stephen’s Armenian Elementary School and St. Stephen’s Armenian Preschool, Watertown and its Manoug and Me, a music and movement program; weekend and church-based schools and programs include the Ereuni Armenian School, Belmont and its Little Miracles Children’s Chorus; Holy Trinity Armenian School, Cambridge; St. Sahag & St. Mesrob Armenian School of St. James Armenian Church, Watertown and St. Stephen’s Armenian Saturday School, Watertown. Music programs also include the Hamazkayin Children’s Voice Academy, Watertown. Dance programs include Abaka Dance Academy, Watertown and Armenian Dance Studio, Waltham. Storytelling in Armenian includes UԲԳ for Children at the NAASR Headquarters and the virtual Armenian Crash Course.

Together, these schools and programs, with their exceptional leadership, form a vibrant and committed community dedicated to preserving our Armenian language, culture, heritage and identity while inspiring curiosity, creativity and pride now and in the next generation.

To register, visit [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](http://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar). Share with your family and friends.





COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page

God Rescues and Restores Us

Red poinsettias bathed in candlelight adorned the holy altar, while the sweet smell of incense rose from the censers, gently swathing the sanctum as it lifted the prayers of the badarak toward the heavens. Wearing violet and gold-hued liturgical vestments, Bishop Mesrop guided the congregation in prayer and offered blessings to parishioners as he moved in solemn procession. All throughout, the choir’s voices rose in a pure, luminous harmony, soaring about the sanctuary to deepen the reverence of the moment.

Bishop Mesrop’s homily explored the meaning of Salvation and how God never abandons us, no matter how grave the circumstances or forlorn we may feel. “When we cannot save ourselves, God steps in,” he said reassuringly. “God chooses to enter the darkness, chaos and brokenness to save us.” He explained that Salvation means both “rescue” and “restoration,” as God delivers us from danger and heals what has been wounded.

Heaven Is Fluent in Humanity

The Primate also clearly illustrated how Christ is able to understand the difficulties and trials we endure in daily life. “God speaks our language,” he emphasized. “He knows hunger because He was hungry; He knows exhaustion because He was tired; He knows rejection because He was rejected; He knows pain because He suffered; He knows grief because he wept.” Through our Savior Jesus Christ, God lifts us up and takes us back home, bringing us peace, love and healing hope.

The sermon concluded with a powerful reminder to hold fast to the Good News of the Nativity of Christ to guide your steps



The Armenian Christmas liturgy at New York’s St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral concludes with the “Blessing of Water” ceremony. Pictured from left, Dn. Hovhannes Khosdeghian, Fr. Davit Karamyan, Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, Fr. Mardiros Chevia, Godfather of the Cross Haig Ariyan, Dn. Gregory Kazanjian. (photo Harout Barsoumian, BARS images)

every day. It compels all of us to keep in mind that God still brings light into the world, no matter how dark it may be.

The Godfather of the Cross (Gunkahayr) for the Christmas Blessing of Water ceremony was Haig Ariyan, a member of St. Thomas Armenian Church in Tenafly, NJ. His dedication and benevolence to the Armenian community include past and present service on the Diocese Board of Trustees, the AGBU Central Council, as well as Chair of the Armenian Church Endowment Fund Investment Committee and a Dadourian Foundation Board Member.

The Armenian Christmas Divine Liturgy went forward with the participation of Fr. Davit Karamyan, Vicar of St. Vartan Cathedral and Fr. Mardiros Chevia, Dean of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, as well as a large contingent of deacons, altar servers, and seminarians. Hasmik Mekanejian directed the angelic voices of the St. Vartan Cathedral Choir, accompanied on the organ by Kris Kalfayan.

The online broadcast was directed by Yervant Keshishian, with Chris Zakian providing the narration. Mano Baghjajian and Ani Villalba manned the video controls

and social media respectively, and Harout Barsoumian photographed the service inside the sanctuary.

St. Vartan Cathedral’s Christmas celebration began on the evening of January 5, with the solemn Irakalouyts (“Lamp-lighting”) service, followed by scripture readings traditionally celebrated on Christmas Eve. The Divine Liturgy, celebrated by Fr. Karamyan, immediately followed. In accordance with Armenian church tradition, the Feast of Theophany will be formally observed through the great day of January 13, completing the “octave” of Theophany.



## Tekeyan Cultural Association

# Sponsor a Teacher in Armenia

Since its inception in 2001, The TCA Sponsor A Teacher program has raised \$838,700 and reached out to 7,386 teachers and school staff in Armenia and Artsakh.

Yes, I would like to sponsor TCA school teacher(s) in Armenia, as well as teachers who fled Artsakh and continue teaching in Armenia schools, to continue helping them to work, and educate the children, our future leaders. I would like to have the teacher(s)’s name(s) and address(es).



Yes, I would like to sponsor TCA school teacher(s) in Armenia, as well as teachers who fled Artsakh and continue teaching in Armenia schools, to continue helping them to work, and educate the children, our future leaders. I would like to have the teacher(s)’s name(s) and address(es).

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[givebutter.com/Og6lky](https://givebutter.com/Og6lky)

Your donation is tax deductible.



# Society for Armenian Studies Elects 2026 Executive Council Officers

The Society for Armenian Studies (SAS) held its Annual Membership Meeting on Saturday, November 15, followed by an Executive Council meeting on Saturday, December 13, 2025. The Executive Council elected new officers for the upcoming

year: President, Barlow Der Mugrdechian (Berberian Coordinator of the Armenian Studies Program, Fresno State); Vice-President, Asya Darbinyan (executive director of CHHANGE [Center for Holocaust, Human Rights & Genocide Education] at

Brookdale Community College, New Jersey); Treasurer, Talar Chahinian (Program for Armenian Studies, University of California, Irvine); Secretary, David Zakarian (Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies, Fresno State); and advisors, Victoria Abrahamyan (Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Geneva); Melanie Tanielian (Associate Professor of History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), and Bedros Torosian (UC Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Davis [History Department]).

*Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* co-editors Houri Berberian (Meghrouni Family Presidential Chair in Armenian Studies and Director of the Center for Armenian Studies, University of California, Irvine) and Talinn Grigor (Professor of Art and Architectural History, University of California, Davis) will continue to serve as ex-officio officers of the SAS Executive Council.

"I am looking forward to my upcoming year as President of the Society for Armenian Studies and I look forward to working

both with the continuing and new officers," said Der Mugrdechian. "SAS plays a vital role in the field of Armenian Studies. Our members around the world are devoted to the study of Armenia and the Armenian people. This research, shared with the academic community and the public, helps raise awareness about Armenian culture."

Der Mugrdechian thanked 2025 outgoing Executive Council members Elyse Semerdjian, Armen Marsoobian, and Helen Makhdoomian for their dedication and service to SAS.

Under Der Mugrdechian's leadership, SAS will continue its commitment to the development of Armenian Studies and to working with scholars and organizations across the globe.

SAS celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2024.

The SAS website, [societyforarmenian-studies.com](http://societyforarmenian-studies.com), provides information about events and activities.



Top row, left to right: Victoria Abrahamyan, Melanie Tanielian, Bedros Torosian; Middle row, left to right: Asya Darbinyan, Barlow Der Mugrdechian, David Zakarian; Bottom row, left to right: Talar Chahinian, Houri Berberian, Talinn Grigor

## OBITUARY

### Anie Manoushagian Dedicated Nurse

WALTHAM, Mass. — Anie Manoushagian was born in Lebanon in 1945 to the Rev. and Mrs. Barkev and Arousiag Orchanian. She passed away on December 23, 2025.

She spent part of her childhood in Syria, where her father ministered to an Armenian Evangelical Community.

After high school, she enrolled in the Nursing Program at the American University in Beirut where she earned her degree in nursing. She worked for three years as a surgical nurse and midwife in Saudi Arabia.

After returning to Lebanon, she immigrated to the US in 1979. She worked at several hospitals in Malden and Boston as a registered nurse.

She sang in the Yerevan Choral Society for many years, and was a dedicated member of the Armenian Memorial Church in Watertown since 1979.

She was fluent in English, Armenian, Arabic and Turkish, and for several years worked as the head nurse at Arevig Adult Day Health Care Center in Watertown. She retired in 2014.

She is survived by her husband of 38 years, Berj Manoushagian, of Waltham; her brother and his wife John and Maral Orchanian of Lexington and her nephew Johnie Norayr Orchanian of Woburn.



Anie and her nephew Arie Orchanian passed away instantly in a car accident on December 23, 2025 when returning to the Armenian Memorial Church after a family member's funeral.

Funeral services for both Anie and Arie were held on Monday, January 5, 2026 at the First Armenian Church, Belmont. Interment for Anie was at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne, MA on Wednesday January 7.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Armenian Memorial Church of Watertown, in Anie's memory.

## Donations

Peter Balakian donated \$250 to the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*.

Theodore Touloukian of Boston donated \$100 to the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*.

The *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Herman Hintiryan for their ongoing generous support of the newspaper.

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## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Hypertension Effort Aims to Bring Heart Health to Rural Armenia

HYPERTENSION, from page 6  
your blood pressure can greatly reduce this risk, said Mirzabegian.

She continued, “As our project advisor, Dr. Chobanian emphasized the importance of adopting a systems-based approach, alongside educating doctors and nurses. Drawing on insights gained from attending a Conference on Cardiovascular Disease and Global Health and through close collaboration with fellow board members, including Dr. Vatche Minassian, a proposal was developed. However, a local partner in Armenia was still needed, and thus, FAR was approached.”

“Why FAR? They have had continuing medical education programs for over 20 years, not just for doctors but also for nurses, across provinces in Armenia. They have the infrastructure in place and the network,” she added.

This is the first project between the AAMA and FAR, though previously, the two had collaborated on sending humanitarian aid during the Artsakh war and COVID-19.

## Increasing Heart Disease

Simonyan and Mirzabegian said one in three adults in Armenia is affected by hypertension. There are fewer resources in rural areas, and thus, they decided to focus on it. FAR settled on Byurakan in Aragatsotn and Khndzoresk in Syunik as the pilot sites.

Khndzoresk is on the border with Azerbaijan and is serviced by a mobile component through HENAR and Santé Arménie. There is one doctor in a van visiting the surrounding villages. In Byurakan, the program is situated in a building.

In this collaborative effort, the doctors in the US share their knowledge and experience and the doctors on site in Armenia do the work seeing patients and following the guidelines of the WHO Hearts Package.

The WHO guidelines specifically address needs in developing countries, with



Clinic in Byurakan

you suggest to the patient to adhere to the medications, because, for example, some people skip pills,” Mirzabegian said.

“It has several steps, which includes making sure the medications are available, making sure the doctors and nurses are trained and that educational materials are available for patients to get them engaged,” she said.

That includes electronic records, which Armenia is in the process of implementing,

conduct a baseline evaluation with physicians and healthcare workers in the pilot sites and get them trained and train the patients, provide the medicines, etc. All this requires certain organizational work.”

Simonyan’s colleagues in Armenia in this effort include Dr. Arno Hovhannisyan, and Armenian experts, Dr. H. Sisakyan, Dr. S. Hovhannisyan, Dr. E. Aghajanova and Dr. L. Sahakyan.

He added that he hoped the program would grow nationally. He said, “Our long-term goal is to show the government the success of this model and insist on replicating it nationally. In this case it’s very important to have also approval by local experts and specialists who played an instrumental role in the adoption of these protocols, training guidelines, and training for local staff.”

A vital point for doctors working in rural places is that medicine is not the most important part of the control, but behavior and lifestyles are, Simonyan said. “This is a very simple protocol. It is very affordable so this is why we are sure that if we have success, we can share it with the government.”

“The behavior change is much more important. This program, we use this opportunity one more time to provide our health care professionals working in primary care that they should spend a little more time for patient education, for follow-up and monitoring, which are necessary in Armenia,” Simonyan said.

Something that sets the WHO protocol apart from the protocol in first-world countries is emphasis on follow-up, finding out why patients don’t come for scheduled visits and more direct communication stressing the importance of the process. “If you have that system in place, it’s going to make a big difference,” Mirzabegian said.

While many often think that the typical diet of Armenians is healthy, Simonyan said that much has changed. Fast food and junk food are prevalent even in rural areas, including foods with high sugar and salt. In addition, traditional breads and cheese are very salty. Tobacco and alcohol consumption remains high, with smoking rates

climbing.

In addition, obesity is increasing due to an unhealthy diet and little physical activity.

## Positive Results

The efforts seem to be paying off.

“After four months we found positive findings,” Simonyan said.

“We already have an idea how it’s working. We are in the right direction. It’s not a formal evaluation but preliminary results show that we have registered decreasing in both sites elevated blood pressure. It is the first stage before the diagnosis of hypertension,” Simonyan said. “We have improvements in important indicators. ... They registered some community members who said they have started to smoke less and started to walk and increase physical activity.”

Some preliminary numbers indicate that the elevated blood pressure numbers in Byurakan have gone from 31 to 23 percent and 53 to 40 in Khndzoresk, he said.

Mirzabegian said that when she visited Khndzoresk, she heard from physicians that patients would come more frequently and talk about other concerns, such as cholesterol and diet. “They felt they were being heard and that people cared for them. It is a motivation.”

She said one particular doctor in Byurakan area started to walk with her husband in the evenings. At first, many thought it was strange. Before long, most of the villagers joined them in the evening strolls.

And the benefits seem to trickle in a different direction. They got high school students to do data entry after asking the patients questions. Those students have gotten certificates which will help them especially as some have been motivated to get into healthcare.

Mirzabegian stressed that the program can be formally assessed after 18 months.

Simonyan paid tribute to Mirzabegian, saying similar programs are executed with a huge staff. “We’re doing this program with a small staff but great dedication,” he said.

—Alin K. Gregorian



At the Byurakan clinic, with Dr. Richard Babayan, left, and Dr. Hambardzum Simonyan, second from right, and colleagues

emphasis on affordability and behavior modification, in addition to medications and follow-ups after the initial diagnosis.

Both stressed that hypertension is already being treated in Armenia, however, this specific protocol is creating a model for a start-to-finish model in rural regions, where patients’ adherence to a treatment regime is not consistent.

“When you have a protocol, it gives more value and emphasis. We’re constantly learning in terms of what combinations work better. I still have to go to classes, learn motivational interviewing, what can

Mirzabegian said.

Explained Mirzabegian, “The goal is to use this specific hypertension treatment protocol, such as what medication to use first, second third, patients come in once a month to check, etc. They have that in place. It is a team-based approach.”

Simonyan concurred. “According to the WHO, the purpose of this model is to establish the interrelated and obligatory cycles that are necessary for better control, such as community engagement, medicine, treatment adherence, patient education and an electronic database. For this we need to





**KHACHKAR STUDIOS**

EMPOWERING GOOD NEWS

# A Failing U.S. Armenian Christian Ecosystem Currently Underperforming v

The 3% “Faithful” U.S. Armenian Christian Ecosystem bottom decile of the U.S. Body Parts with deeply rooted barriers to change. In stark contrast, a small group have among the highest non-holiday church attendance rate of 30% in the world. Over the past decade the number of “Faithful” has declined and the Armenian church is now a fraction of overall U.S. population

“Faithful” defined as those who regularly attend Armenian church o

**(2) 2%** of major Armenian Philanthropist donations to Armenian religious activities (2001 to 2023)

**(3) 2%** religious content in Armenian theme major international films (1982-2023)

**(4) 3%** of articles have religious content in 18 Armenian English language news outlets (2024 sample)

**(5) 5%** of advertisements have religious content in 18 Armenian English language news outlets (2024 sample)

**(6) 6%** religious content in 321 Armenian Documentaries (1930-2024)

**(1) 3% Armenians**

Armenian churches in the U.S. rank — next to last place — among the largest religious groups in regular weekly attendance in 2010 and 2020 and 10% of the average of Protestants and Catholics regular weekly attendance

Notes. (a) “Faithful”. Non-Holiday Badarak Faithful, which is Khachkar Studios Key Performance Indicator #1, KPI #1. (b) Numbers of Armenian Americans are from 1957 to 2024. (c) See Khachkar Studios webpage “Analyses” for additional information. (d) The 3% Armenian Christians are 460,254 Armenian Americans. Furthermore, it is very important to remember that the percentage of Armenian “Faithful” is only





View the systems map  
and listen to the  
podcast at:



# Armenian Ecosystem: 12 Body Parts with Extraordinary Potential

...e -- next to last place -- performance permeates all of the 12 Ecosystem  
systemic misconception held by many Armenian Americans is that they  
... and have best-in-class performance on all 12 Ecosystem Body Parts.  
... annual percentage increase in the number of Armenian in the U.S. census  
... growth and was from 1980 to 2010 a multiple.

...n non-holidays. Percentages are of relevante U.S. Armenian group.

**(7) 1%** of U.S. Armenians aged 18-29 are “Faithful”, a small fraction of  
the 10% who attend accredited Armenian schools - KPI #3

**“Faithful” - KPI #1**  
...ranked in the bottom decile  
...he 23 U.S. Orthodox Christian  
...ance % of adherents in both  
...average of U.S. Protestants  
...endance percentage.

**(8) 0%** reading the Bible daily - KPI #2

**(9) 0%** attending Bible study classes

**(10) 0%** Biblically inspired world-class  
benchmarking and management  
excellence - KPI #4

**(11) 0%** of church role models non-work hours participating  
in church activities training and retention % - KPI #5

**(12) 3.7x** SROI which is 39% of the  
U.S. Orthodox Median SROI of 9.4x

...bers are rounded to an integer. (c) SROI. Social Return on Investment. (d) For Ecosystem body parts 10 and 11, the analyzed  
...n American "Faithful" is 12,894 attendees at 164 Armenian churches in 25 states divided by the official U S census number of  
...1% if the credible and widely cited number of 1+ million Armenian Americans is the denominator





# Arts & Culture

## ‘Zabel in Exile’ Revives Yessayan’s Brave Message On Stage

BOSTON — While writer and activist Zabel Yessayan had been relegated to obscurity for decades after her disappearance under murky circumstances in 1942 after her repatriation to Soviet Armenia, a new play titled “Zabel in Exile” resurrects her on stage with powerful, humorous and touching scenes of Yessayan’s past and excerpts of her written work.

Written by R.N. Sandberg and sponsored by Judith Saryan and Victor Zarougian, “Zabel in Exile” offers a fresh perspective on Yessayan’s life that imagines aspects of the past in ways that resonate in the present for all Armenians.

The play will be staged at the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre starting on February 19 and will run through March 8.



Zabel Yessayan

The play centers on the character Zabel as she awaits execution in a Soviet prison cell in 1937. Zabel remembers her life’s major moments of resistance in classrooms, state hospitals, the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union. The play’s non-linear vignettes shed light on the events that she experienced and the places in which she lived.

Even Armenian audiences familiar with Yessayan’s life and times can learn something new by watching the play. As Saryan admits, “We know the stories that she’s been through: the massacres, the genocide, the Soviet Union, the [Stalinist] purges. We know these stories, but to actually learn about someone who experienced a huge swath of this very tumultuous time and who came out with so much energy, vigor, hope, and a willingness to come face to face with her monsters...I think that Armenians would feel very proud.”

Actor Grace Experience, whose father is novelist Chris Bohjalian, expressed her excitement to play Yessayan’s daughter Sophie by sharing, “I grew up with [Yessayan’s] books in my house, but I know that most people don’t know who she is.” She continued, “Zabel was so brave, and hearing the play during our first read through made me feel empowered to be brave. I hope that people watching can walk away with that, as well as knowledge of the time and the complicated, brilliant person that Zabel was.”

see ZABEL, page 14



From left: Jen Siraganian, Raffi Wartanian, Sehba Sarwar, and Nancy Miller Gomez, December 13, 2025 (Karine Armen photo)

## Glendale Workshops Encourage Nascent Poets

By Karine Armen  
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

GLENDAL — The City of Glendale offers poetry workshops at two libraries. On Saturday, December 13, there was a poetry reading and workshop at the Glendale Central Library, led by Poet Laureate Raffi Wartanian, with guest poets Jen Siraganian, Sehba Sarwar and Nancy Miller Gomez.

The thought-provoking and educational event started with poetry readings by each guest poet. Later, they gave several prompts to choose from. After 20 minutes of writing, the participants read the poems they had written during the workshop.

Wartanian, who teaches writing at UCLA, has an impressive background. He is a poet, writer, educator, composer, singer and musician. He plays the oud and other Armenian instruments and promotes Western Armenian poetry. He has published two musical CDs of original music. He serves on the advisory board of the International Armenian Literary Alliance (IALA). He holds an MFA in writing from Columbia University. His essays and poems have appeared in many literary magazines.

Wartanian has been the Glendale Public Library’s Poet Laureate since 2023, during which time he has organized poetry workshops and published two anthologies featuring poems by workshop participants.

Siraganian is an Armenian-American writer, educator and former Poet Laureate of Los Gatos, Calif. Author of the chapbook *Fracture* (Deconstructed Artichoke Press), she has been profiled in the San Francisco Chronicle and San Jose’s The Mercury News. Her poetry has won the New Ohio Review Poetry Prize and has appeared in *AGNI*, *Best New Poets*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Cortland Review*, see POETS, page 15



Poet Tina Demirdjian explaining the writing workshops. Principal and poet Shahe Mankerian is in the burgundy sweater. (Dec.2) (Karine Armen photo)

## Meline Mesropyan

*Armenian Traces in Japanese Archives and New Discoveries about Diana Apcar’s Life*

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan  
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

YEREVAN-KOBE, Japan — Meline Mesropyan (born in Yerevan) studied Japanese at the Yerevan Institute of Humanities before working at a travel agency for a few years. She has lived in Japan since 2011. In 2025, she co-authored the Japanese-language book *The “Diaspora” that Lived in Japan: Diana Apcar and the Armenian Genocide*, a study of Diana Apcar (1859–1937), an Armenian-born businesswoman, writer, humanitarian, and Honorary Consul of Armenia in Japan.



Dear Meline, how did you end up in Japan?

I began studying Japanese at the Yerevan Institute of Humanities, and I quickly fell in love with the language. It was difficult, but fascinating — full of cultural layers. Like many students of Japanese, I started to dream of one day living in Japan. In 2010, I took the entrance examination and received a scholarship from Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to continue my studies at a Japanese university.

I moved to Japan in October 2011 as a researcher and settled in Sendai, home to Tohoku University. In 2013, I entered Tohoku University’s master’s program and then continued to doctoral studies, where I wrote my dissertation on Diana Apcar. Today, I teach courses such as “Global Europe,” “Japanese Culture and Society,” and English and Russian at universities in Kobe and Osaka. Last year, I also had the chance to teach Armenian for one year at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. I had seven students, and their enthusiasm was truly moving. We even held an Armenian food gathering at the end of the year, cooking dishes like harisa and tolma together, and sharing gata for dessert. Unfortunately, the course could not continue due to reductions in teaching hours, but the students kept writing to me with Armenian grammar questions for nearly a year afterward. I hope I can revive such classes again in the future.

I congratulate you on the publication of your Japanese-language  
continued on next page





## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

from previous page

**work devoted to one of the most fascinating women in our history, Diana Apcar. There was a need not to incorporate information from Japanese sources.**

When I arrived in Japan I planned to specialize in Japanese psycholinguistics. That changed after a conversation with a friend who was then working as a diplomat in Tokyo. He suggested that, since I already spoke Japanese, I might consider a topic that connected Armenia and Japan. At that moment, I remembered a photograph I had once seen at the Armenian Embassy in Tokyo, an image of Diana, whose name I learned at school, but realized how little I actually knew about her life. That moment marked the real beginning of my research journey.

I began searching for her name. The first writing I encountered was by the Japanese researcher Hideharu Nakajima, who had discovered Diana Apcar's grave in Yokohama. Almost simultaneously, my family in Yerevan informed me that a booklet on Apcar, containing your article, Artsvi, had just been published in New Julfa. At such an early stage, this was crucial, not only as a source, but as confirmation that her life could and should be studied seriously. Your work became one of the foundations on which I began to build my own research.

As I delved deeper, I was struck by how limited and fragmented the existing scholarship was. From the outset, my aim was not to portray her as a heroic figure, but to understand her as a historical actor operating within specific political, institutional, and social constraints.

My research took on a strongly archival and transnational character. Alongside Japanese official records, newspapers, and administrative documents, I worked with correspondence preserved in European and American archives. Although Apcar lived in Japan, her intellectual and humanitarian activities were embedded in a wide international network, and many of her letters survive outside Japan, in the personal papers of prominent figures.

This work was complicated by the loss of many of her personal papers, destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 and later during the Second World War. To reconstruct her life, I relied on materials in multiple languages such as Japanese, English, Armenian, Russian and French, carefully cross-referencing sources and piecing together fragmented evidence across archives in cities such as Sendai, Yokohama, Tokyo, Kobe, Hiroshima, Tsuruga, etc.

Over time, this approach led to a number of important discoveries and, above all, to a solid documentary framework that allows us to see Diana Apcar as a historically situated individual responding to the political and humanitarian crises of her time.

#### Your co-author is Arisa Ohta.

The book was published in collaboration with journalist Arisa Ohta, whom I was introduced to by the publisher Fujiwara Shoten at an early stage of the project. The publisher proposed a co-authored volume to present Diana Apcar's life in clear, accessible Japanese while firmly situating it within Japan's historical and social context. This approach was essential for conveying the significance of her work in Japan. Arisa Ohta's contribution went far beyond linguistic refinement. Throughout the writing process, she consistently challenged my interpretations with sharp, thoughtful questions, ensuring historical accuracy, balance, and clarity for Japanese readers. During our collaboration, Arisa also conducted her own investigations, which led to several important findings, including the identification of the previously unknown grave of one of Diana's children in Yokohama and the discovery of a document clarifying Diana's close relationship with a foreign

resident woman involved in fundraising for Armenian refugees. These findings helped complete aspects of the historical narrative that had long remained fragmentary.

This book was shaped through the involvement of many individuals who supported the research at different stages. I already mentioned late Hideharu Nakajima, who shared his materials and insights and accompanied me to Yokohama to visit the grave he had long cared for.

Shinji Shigematsu's research on Apcar & Co. as well as the hotel business clarified the Armenian commercial presence in Yokohama.

Grant Pogosyan, the first Ambassador of Armenia to Japan, supported my research from its early stages and continued to assist after the completion of my PhD, including in the search for a publisher. Former Ambassador Areg Hovhannisian and the current Ambassador Monica Simonyan sustained this initiative through the Embassy of Armenia in Japan.

Diana's great-granddaughter, Mimi Malayan, has been connected to my research for more than a decade. Her openness and strong sense of responsibility toward her great-grandmother's legacy made long-term work on this subject possible, and our collaboration continues today through ongoing projects related to Diana Apcar.

I would also like to remember Lucille Apcar, Diana's granddaughter, who passed away in 2021. Her memoir, written from childhood memory, was an invaluable source for my research and had already played an important role in earlier Armenian scholarship.

Many descendants of Armenian survivors who passed through Diana Apcar's care shared family archives, letters, photographs, and memories that brought her humanitarian work vividly to life.

Additional support came from Liz Chater, who guided me toward crucial sources; from Fujiwara Shoten and its director Yoshio Fujiwara, whose interest in Armenia and Diana made the publication possible; and from our editor Taku Kariya, whose meticulous attention to detail shaped the final manuscript. The assistance of the library staff at Tohoku University and of many colleagues in Japan, Armenia, and abroad also played an important role throughout this research.

#### Could you indicate what new facts you managed to uncover?

When I began this research, it was already clear that many questions about Diana remained unanswered, not due to a lack of interest, but because the sources were scattered across countries, languages and archives. What my research gradually demonstrated was how much becomes visible once Armenian materials are read alongside Japanese and international sources.

One of my main contributions was reconstructing Diana's life as a whole rather than in fragments. This included tracing her family background, childhood environment, education, and early marriage, which helped explain how her worldview was formed long before her arrival in Japan. I was also able to clarify why the Apcar family came to Japan.

Another major discovery concerned her writings. When I began my research, fewer than twenty articles by Diana were known. Through long-term archival work, I identified more than 180 articles published between roughly 1904 and 1936 in Japanese and international newspapers and journals. This made it possible to follow the development of her political and humanitarian ideas over more than three decades and to see how consistently she engaged with international affairs and the Armenian cause.

Equally important were her private letters with prominent figures. These correspon-

dences revealed a more personal side of Diana Apcar: her doubts, frustrations, long-term strategies, and inner reflections, which never appeared in her published writings.

From an institutional perspective, a key finding was the discovery, during my master's research in 2013, of Japanese diplomatic documents related to her appointment as Honorary Consul of the First Republic of Armenia. These materials clarified how her appointment was understood within Japanese official circles and helped correct exaggerated or inaccurate claims that continue to circulate.

In addition, correspondence with the Japanese Home Ministry and Foreign Ministry shed light on how Armenian refugee requests were handled in practice. Read together with documents from the American Red Cross in Vladivostok, these sources reveal the concrete mechanics of humanitarian even within a strict immigration regime.

My research also showed that Diana's relationship with Japan evolved over time. Finally, I want to emphasize that this research builds directly on earlier Armenian scholarship, especially your own work, Artsvi.

**Over the past decade, Diana Apcar has seemingly become fashionable. In particular, the claim that she was the world's first female ambassador is frequently uttered. However, in the 17th century there were women ambassadors. Nevertheless, we can state with pride that Apcar was the first Armenian woman to engage in diplomatic activity.**

Diana is often described as "the world's first woman diplomat" or "the first woman ambassador," claims that do not withstand academic scrutiny. Diana was appointed honorary consul by the First Republic of Armenia, a newly independent and politically fragile state. Under the international law of the period, honorary consuls, especially those residing in the host country and not salaried by the appointing government, were not regarded as diplomats, even when they performed diplomatic functions. Her appointment was not formally recognized by the Japanese government. At the same time, it is undeniable that Diana carried out diplomatic work in practice. From around 1910 through the late 1920s, she negotiated with governments, corresponded with international organizations, advocated for refugees, and acted as a representative voice for Armenians, often without the backing of a sovereign state. This is why her great-granddaughter later chose the title for her documentary *The Stateless Diplomat*: not to assert formal rank, but to describe a woman who performed diplomatic work without state protection.

What can be stated with confidence, and with pride, is that Diana Apcar was the first Armenian woman to engage in sustained diplomatic activity. Her work represents an early and remarkable example of Armenian participation in international humanitarian and diplomatic networks. Understanding her within the legal, political, and historical conditions of her time does not diminish her importance. On the contrary, it allows us to appreciate the originality and courage of her actions without relying on mythologized titles.

**Let us examine another contentious issue. Archival documents attest that on July 22, 1920, Diana Apcar was appointed diplomatic representative of the First Republic of Armenia, with the rank of honorary consul. Because of historical circumstances, this appointment remained unilateral: by the end of 1920 the Republic of Armenia had ceased to exist, and Apcar was never officially recognized by the government of Japan as Armenia's consul. Nevertheless, I believe that this episode also in no way**

**diminishes the fact of Diana Apcar's appointment as honorary consul of the Republic of Armenia.**

I fully agree that the lack of formal recognition by the Japanese government does not diminish the historical significance of Diana Apcar's appointment as Honorary Consul. On the contrary, the appointment itself was remarkable, as it formally acknowledged more than a decade of sustained humanitarian, political, and advocacy work she had already carried out on behalf of Armenians.

At the same time, this episode requires careful interpretation. Diplomatic and consular appointments in the early twentieth century operated within a complex legal and political framework, particularly for newly established states such as the First Republic of Armenia. Apcar's appointment was a unilateral act by a fragile and internationally vulnerable republic whose existence was under constant threat. By the end of 1920, the Armenian Republic had ceased to exist, making recognition by host governments increasingly unlikely.

**Few people know that Diana Apcar also wrote both prose and verse. I read her novel *Susan*, which has an autobiographical character and is one of the very few works of fiction devoted to the Indo-Armenian community. Did you also address her literary legacy?**

Yes, I addressed Diana's literary works alongside her political and humanitarian writings. In addition to her essays and advocacy, she also produced works of fiction, both prose and poetry, which form an important but often overlooked part of her intellectual legacy. She wrote two prose fictional works. Literary in form, they draw closely on the social worlds Apcar knew, reflecting the lived realities of Armenian diaspora communities and colonial-era societies. While not autobiographical in a strict sense, they are deeply shaped by her experiences and observations.

*Susan*, which you mention, stands out for its strong autobiographical tone and is among the few fictional works portraying the Indian Armenian experience from within. Susan had many common characteristics with Diana herself. However, I should note that Diana's relationship with her mother was likely very good, unlike Susan's.

I also examined *Home Stories of the War*, a series that occupies a space between literature, testimony and moral reflection. These narrative sketches convey the human cost of war through everyday lives, particularly those of women and children. In both cases, the stories suggest a close engagement with the realities of their time and place.

**This autumn it will be 15 years since you moved to Japan, where you have started a family. Have you managed to pass on lessons of Armenian identity to your child?**

Yes, time flies! Passing on Armenian identity to my son is something I try to do within the realities of school life and a multilingual environment. My husband, Jeremy September, is from South Africa. He is an economist and teaches at Hyogo University. He speaks English with him, Japanese dominates his daily life, and from birth I made a conscious decision to speak only Armenian with him. His Armenian naturally lags behind his Japanese and English, especially given the limited Armenian children's content, but reading and storytelling remain central for us. He loves the story of Anahit and Hayk Nahapet, perhaps not by chance, as his own name is Hayk. I do not expect Armenian identity to come effortlessly; what matters is planting the seed, so that one day he knows where he comes from and feels free to return to it in his own way.





ARTS & CULTURE

# Recipe Corner



by Christine Vartanian Datian



## Anne Marootian’s Famous Peanut Butter Kufteh

“The St. Leon Armenian Church Women’s Guild Cookbook in Fairlawn, New Jersey features a peanut butter kufteh recipe submitted by the late Anne Marootian who said that the recipe was handed down to her from her beloved and talented mother, Aghavni Marookian, a native of Kharpert,” says Robyn Kalajian, a retired culinary teacher and chief cook at The Armenian Kitchen.com.

Robyn adds, “The Marootian family and my family (the Dabbakians) go way back — I’m talking decades. We were neighbors in Clifton, NJ for approximately 40 years, and attended every church event together for years beyond that. Whenever the Marootians invited us for an impromptu get-together, Anne was sure to serve a tableful of delicious desserts that she quickly whipped-up. Not only was Anne a terrific cook, she told some pretty funny jokes, too.”

“Anne, born in New York City on July 9, 1915 to Armenian immigrant parents, passed away on November 20, 2012 at the age of 97. She married Zaven Marootian in 1938 and together raised 3 wonderful sons. Anne and Zaven owned and operated Zaven’s Luncheonette in Paterson, NJ, where she was the chief cook and bookkeeper, and later was bookkeeper in Marootian Trading Corporation. The family moved to Clifton in 1959. Anne and Zaven were both very active parishioners in St. Leon Armenian Church in Fair Lawn, where Anne was a noted cook of Armenian cuisine. She headed the Food Committee for food festivals and social functions. Anne was known for her delightful hospitality, generosity, joyful spirit

and sense of humor.”

“I’m always intrigued by a family recipe’s history, and when I found this one, it conjured up old memories of my youth back in New Jersey during the 1950s and 1960s. I walked past the Marootian’s house on my way home from elementary and junior high school each day, and often recall being greeted on occasion by the elder Mrs. Marookian with a warm smile and a gentle wave. Here’s Anne and her mother’s special Peanut Butter Kufteh recipe that I have cherished for many years. It is delicious and never fails to impress our family and guests at Lent and throughout the year...”

**FILLING INGREDIENTS:**

- 21 oz. chunky peanut butter (3/4 of a 24-oz. jar)
- 3 cups chopped onion
- 1 teaspoon dried mint
- 1/4 teaspoon dried basil
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon seasoned salt (Robyn uses Kosher salt)

**OUTER SHELL INGREDIENTS:**

- 2 1/2 cups fine bulgur (#1 size)
- 1 1/2 cups oatmeal
- 1 1/2 cups farina (Cream of Wheat)
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon dried mint
- 1/4 teaspoon dried basil
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 3 cups hot water

**FILLING DIRECTIONS:**

Mix all of the filling ingredients in the order listed until well-blended. Set aside.

**OUTER SHELL DIRECTIONS:**

Mix together the bulgur, oatmeal, farina, flour, salt, mint, basil, cayenne, and black pepper; add the hot water, stirring to create a dough. Knead. If mixture is too dry, add a little more hot water.

Take a ball of the dough the size of a golf ball. Make an indentation in the center with your thumb and keep opening and shaping with your index and middle finger. Press down in center and sides, rotating until you get a thin shell.

Fill the shell with one tablespoon or more of the filling. Seal the top and smooth with wet hands. (Keep a bowl of water handy to dip your hands to ease this process.)

Note: According to Anne’s son, George, the kufteh is shaped in the style of “Kharpertzi” kufteh which is flat on the bottom and slightly rounded on the top. If that’s too hard to master, keep the shape round.

Robyn’s note on shaping: “To make the shell as thin as possible, I lined a small plate with plastic wrap, took a golf ball sized piece of the ‘dough’, flattened it into a circle with my hand, then gently lifted it off the plastic – while trying not to break it. You really do have to keep a small bowl of water to dip your hands into for this process. The water helps ‘glue’ the outer shell together. After placing a spoonful of filling in the center, I gently encased the filling with the outer shell. Finally, I smoothed the surface with wet fingers, making sure the kufteh was flat on the bottom and slightly rounded on the top.”

Place shaped kuftehs on a waxed paper-lined tray or plate, and refrigerate for 20 minutes. While the kuftehs chill, boil water in a large pot with some salt. Remove kuftehs from the refrigerator, and boil, in small batches, for about 10 minutes until all are cooked. Serve immediately.

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## ‘Zabel in Exile’ Revives Yessayan’s Brave Message on Stage

ZABEL, from page 12

The production boasts a predominantly Armenian cast. Director Megan Sandberg-Zakian noted that “it was beyond my wildest imagination to have four of the six actors be Armenian” when putting out a call for Middle Eastern actors. Sandberg-Zakian, who is Armenian on her mother’s side, reflects that “since I didn’t grow up speaking Armenian or immersed in Armenian community, I sometimes wondered if I was ‘Armenian enough.’” Over the years, she has had the opportunity to direct plays about many other communities, but “this production feels like a kind of homecoming.”

It’s a homecoming for many of the actors, too, who are returning to their New England Armenian roots by being cast to play an ensemble of various characters on stage. June Baboian, who was born and raised in Watertown where she serves as a music director for a local Armenian church, beamed while sharing that “I feel like all my ancestors are going to be on

stage with me.” Anelga Hajjar, who was born and raised in Boston but more recently has been recently based in Chicago, remarked on her role of the Guard: “People see bushy eyebrows and cast me as every ethnicity under the sun, but this time I’m going to get to be Armenian, so I’m excited.” Robert Najarian, whose Armenian-Italian family has roots in Massachusetts, stated, “That’s what I really hope for this show. That the Armenian community is made aware of it, because when they are made aware that they can see Armenians being represented on stage, they will come out in force.”

For Armenians in the cast, the family dynamics depicted on stage — such as the relationship between young Zabel and her father, or the relationship between the older Zabel and her daughter — inspire recognition and a renewed appreciation for the enduring bonds of family. Hajjar muses that “I’m curious about what we teach our children about our past and how to even frame the past that we’ve lived. From an Arme-

nian standpoint, too: How do we teach our children to take in what has happened in our past, in our history? What lessons do we want them to learn? What characteristics do we want them to have?”

The actor who plays Zabel, Sarah Corey, shared a personal connection, saying, “Zabel reminds me very much of my Lebanese grandmother, Isabelle, who came from Beirut and was very strong and incredibly intelligent. My Grammy is very much like Zabel.”

Playwright Sandberg describes the play by making connections to his Jewish heritage: “So many Armenian and Jewish works of art deal with genocide, holocaust, victimhood...and this has aspects of that. But it’s a family story. It’s a parents-and-children story. It has a good amount of humor in it, and it’s not a downer.”

Ultimately, “Zabel in Exile” offers a timely and inspirational experience for Armenians watching Zabel come to life on stage.

“You’re going to be captivated by this

woman,” says Sandberg, the play’s writer. “You’re going to be moved. You’re going to laugh. You’re going to learn things. You’re going to be appalled. You’re going to hopefully come out of it and want to engage with things in your life in a more active way. You’re going to look at people more openly.”

This exploration of interconnectedness is also articulated by Danny Bryck, a cast member of partly Sephardic Jewish heritage. Depicting characters from Zabel’s past, who represent a diverse range of cultural backgrounds violently uprooted and displaced by the Ottoman Empire, is “to stitch that tapestry back together,” “to reach back to the lost connections that our ancestors had to inspire us to forge new ones now.”

Tickets for the three-week run of “Zabel in Exile” are on sale now at [www.BostonPlaywrights.org](http://www.BostonPlaywrights.org). Pay-What-You-Want previews will be held Thursday, February 19 (7 p.m.) and Friday, February 20 (8 p.m.).



# Glendale Workshops Encourage Nascent Poets

POETS, from page 12

*Electric Literature*, *Poetry Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Rumpus*. She has received funding from the Money for Women / Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, Community of Writers, and Napa Valley Writers' Conference. Her current manuscript was a finalist for the Tupelo Press Dorset Prize, the Perugia Press Prize, and the Charles B. Wheeler Poetry Prize, and a semi-finalist for the Persea Books' Lexi Rudnitsky First Book Prize, the Philip Levine Prize, and the Vassar Miller Prize. A former managing director of Litquake: San Francisco's Lit-

The workshop participants received encouraging remarks from the four poet laureates. One attendee thanked the organizers of the poetry workshops and mentioned the workshops conducted by poet Tina Demirdjian at the Brand Park Art Gallery. Wartanian said, “Glendale City has rich poetry opportunities. We should take advantage of these fantastic poetry events.”

Tina Demirdjian is an established poet and educator. Her workshops, along with art historian Valerie Taylor, are called “ARTful Conversations”. The participants walk through the art gallery’s halls

students from St. Gregory Hovsepien School of Pasadena attended as part of a field trip. Their principal and English teacher, Shahe Mankerian, is a writer, actor, and poet. He is a board member of the International Armenian Literary Alliance (IALA). Mankerian said, "I enjoy being a principal, but I never left the classroom. Teaching is creative." Tina Demirdjian asked Mankerian to read his poem about

his name, “Shahe”. Later, she gave several writing prompts so the students could have choices. Some of them wrote short poems about their names. The young students created heartwarming poems in a short time.

The Altadena library also offers poetry workshops and open mics. The public is invited to join the variety of local poetry platforms.



Eighth-grade students from Hovsepian School of Pasadena attended a poetry workshop at Brand Park in Glendale, December 2 (Karine Armen photo)

erary Festival, she is a current Lucas Artist Fellow at the Montalvo Arts Center.

Sarwar serves as Altadena Co-Poet Laureate (2024-26). Sarwar's writings and art tackle displacement, migration, and women's issues. Nancy Miller Gomez is a poet from Santa Cruz, California. She is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship.

and listen to Taylor's explanations. Later, Demirdjian gives oral and written directions for choosing a painting, collage, or photograph that touched them and writing a poem inspired by that piece. Demirdjian is a mentor with IALA. She teaches poetry at schools, museums, and libraries.

The last ARTful Conversation was on Tuesday, December 2, when eighth-grade

# CALENDAR

## OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

## MASSACHUSETTS

**DECEMBER 12-APRIL 26, 2026** —The Armenian Museum of America 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.

**FEBRUARY 3 — CELEBRATE ARMENIA! PRESENTING SCHOOLS & PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH** Tuesday at 7pm, virtual program showcasing schools and programs. offering instruction in language, culture, history & the arts during the school year recognizing their leadership and commitment to excellence. Announcement & Registration: [Armemiam-HeritagePark.org/Calendar](https://Armemiam-HeritagePark.org/Calendar)

**FEBRUARY 8 — The Arlington Philharmonic Orchestra, led by Music Director Orlando Cela, will present a concert entitled “Armenia”, on Sunday, February 8, at 3 p.m. Arlington High School Auditorium, 869 Massachusetts Ave., Arlington. The entire program will feature works by Armenian composers, including Arlington’s own Alan Hovhaness, and will include: Ballet Suite by Geghuni Chitchyan (world premiere); Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra by Eduard Bagdasaryan featuring violin soloist Sargis Karapetyan; Elegy in Memory of Aram Khachaturian by Arno Babajanian/Arr. S. Arakelian; Symphony No.1, “Exile”, by Alan Hovhaness. Tickets are available at the door: \$20 General Admission, \$15 Students/Seniors, \$5 Children 17 & Under. Wheelchair Accessible. The Arlington Philharmonic Orchestra is part of the Philharmonic Society of Arlington, Inc. a 501(c)3 non-profit community organization which also includes the Arlington-Belmont Choral and the Arlington-Belmont Chamber Chorus. For more information, visit [www.psarlington.org](http://www.psarlington.org)**

**FEBRUARY 14 — Poon Paregantan ("Great Carnival") Dinner-Dance.** Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Church, 180 Old Westford Rd., Chelmsford. A terrific family evening of great food, music and dancing. Featuring Leon Janikian, clarinet; Greg Takvorian, oud/vocals; Dave Anisbigian, guitar/vocals; and Art Chingris, Dumbeg. Latest dance tunes from Armenia and America Pop music by DJ Gar-en. 6 p.m. Adults: \$40. Students: \$15. Children under 6: free. Paid reservations must be made by February 11 either on the church website, [stsvartanantz.com](http://stsvartanantz.com), or by contacting Corie Horan, [coriehoran@gmail.com](mailto:coriehoran@gmail.com), 978-967-6423.

**FEBRUARY 23 - MARCH 22 — On exhibit at Boston City Hall, "Geometry as Public Part: Telling a Story," Curriculum Inspired by Armenian Heritage Park on the Greenway.**

**MARCH 1 — UNDER THE SNOW MOON.** Sunday at 4pm, virtual. Virtual program of Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway. Registration: [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](https://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar)

**APRIL 9 — LET'S GET TOGETHER! Thursday, 7-9pm JOIA BOSTON AT THE HARBORSIDE INN, BOSTON**

**Young Leaders' Friends Benefit for Armenian Heritage Park Donation: \$30/ person. Advance Reservations. [ArmeniaHeritagePark.org/Support](http://ArmeniaHeritagePark.org/Support)**

**MAY 2 — CELEBRATE PUBLIC ART! ABSTRACT SCULPTURE PERMANENT & ALIVE & WORLD LABYRINTH DAY: WALK AS ONE.** Saturday at 12:30 pm. **ARMENIAN HERITAGE PARK ON THE GREENWAY, BOSTON** Join people in cities & towns in 35 countries world-wide: Armenia (Gyumri), Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Columbia, Ecuador, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, South Africa, Spain, many more. Reception following.

**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](mailto:alin@mirrorspectator.com) or [alin.gregorian@gmail.com](mailto:alin.gregorian@gmail.com). You can also visit our website, [www.mirrorspectator.com](http://www.mirrorspectator.com), and find the "calendar" section under the heading "More" 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.

**FRESNO STATE**

Armenian Studies Program

**Armenian Arts**

THE ARMENIAN STUDIES PROGRAM, FRESNO STATE,  
THE TEKEYAN CULTURAL ASSOCIATION METRO LOS ANGELES CHAPTER,  
AND ARMENIAN ARTS PRESENT

## “WESTERN ARMENIAN MUSIC: FROM ASIA MINOR TO THE UNITED STATES”

**Գրքեր-BOOK LAUNCH**  
WITH LIVE MUSICAL EXAMPLES

**GUEST SPEAKER: AUTHOR HACHIG KAZARIAN**

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
**PROF. BARLOW DER MUGRDECHIAN**

Armenian Series, Vol. 18  
Fresno State

Silenced for over one hundred years, the Western Armenian music brought to America by the first Armenian immigrants has become an integral part of Armenian culture in the United States. *Western Armenian Music: From Asia Minor to the United States* examines the many facets of Western Armenian music, and how it has been neglected due to the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the deleterious feelings left upon the Armenian people.

Kazarian's lecture will incorporate topics from his book while focusing on the musical relationship between Armenian folk music and Armenian sacred music. Throughout the session, attendees will gain a comprehensive understanding of how these two distinct musical traditions are related through live performance and recorded musical examples.

*Hachig Kazarian was born in Detroit, Michigan and is a retired secondary instrumental music educator with 45 years of teaching experience. He received his professional credentials from the Millard School of Music, where he earned a B.S. and M.A. degree in clarinet performance. He also attended Western Michigan University, where he received an M.A. degree in Music Literature/Ethnomusicology. Kazarian has performed Western Armenian music for many Armenian churches, societies and patronal organizations throughout the United States.*

*Prof. Barlow Der Mugrdechian is the Executive Coordinator of the Armenian Studies Program and general editor of the Armenian Series of The Press of Fresno State.*

**Sunday, February 22, 2026 • 5:00PM**

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## COMMENTARY

THE ARMENIAN  
**MIRROR  
SPECTATOR**  
SINCE 1932



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# Did Trump Really Pressure Baku and Yerevan?

By Suren Sargsyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Donald Trump's recent statement that he applied pressure in order to advance Armenian-Azerbaijani peace went largely unnoticed, despite its exceptional importance. It cannot be ruled out that the statement went largely unnoticed because that what the authorities in Armenia and Azerbaijan wanted. In Armenia, elections are expected soon, and the authorities are trying to show that they are the ones bringing about peace. In Azerbaijan, it is natural that Aliyev positions himself as a regional player on whom pressure is extremely difficult to exert, even for the president of a great power.

In fact, pressure was directed exclusively at Azerbaijan, since Armenia was already under pressure and prepared to make additional concessions. In other words, it was not Armenia that brought about a change in Baku's position through negotiations; rather, that change occurred as a result of pressure from Washington — not out of consideration for Armenia's interests or out of any goodwill, but strictly within the logic of US interests.

There is a high probability that Azerbaijan did not want to initial the peace agreement because, under that framework, it would have had to take into account the presence of Trump's signature under the document as well. In other words, if Azerbaijan intended to seize additional territories from Armenia or exert pressure on Armenia before the signing of the agreement — particularly in terms of demarcation and delimitation — after initialing the document, Baku's hands would have been somewhat tied.

Baku has, by and large, already obtained everything it wanted from Armenia, yet it continues to maintain its maximalist rhetoric. However, it should not be ruled out that, if the opportunity arises, Baku may still extract additional concessions from Armenia.

The fact that Trump's adviser, Steven Witkoff, did not visit Armenia in March and instead traveled only to Baku for negotiations once again demonstrates that Armenia assumed a passive role in the process and that there was simply nothing to discuss with Yerevan. It is evident that Armenia has met and continues to meet a broad range of concessions. If the situation changed to some extent between the beginning and the end of 2025, this has no connection whatsoever to the actions of Armenia's authorities.

This is a purely geopolitical process, driven by Trump within the framework of advancing US interests from Central Asia to

the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe. A certain stabilization of the situation by no means implies that Azerbaijan has ceased to view Armenia as a hostile state. Evidence of this is abundant, ranging from official rhetoric to concrete actions. Therefore, the decisive role in these developments has been played by US policy under Trump's leadership, while Armenia's authorities have had virtually no involvement in this process — nor could they have.

In reality, the situation has unfolded in such a way that Washington, in order to advance its regional interests, has also taken into account the interests of Ankara and Baku. As a result, both of these states have effectively been granted the idea of being connected by a "corridor," but this arrangement has been packaged under the American flag.

The main beneficiaries of Trump's proposed route are Baku and Ankara, while the main losers are Moscow, Tehran, and Tbilisi. In the cases of Moscow and Tehran, this means a significant reduction of their influence in the South Caucasus. For Tbilisi, it means that Georgia is gradually losing its strategic regional role, which had been tied to the existence of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict as well as to its transit significance.

In essence, the only concession Baku has made to Trump is the name of the route, which will officially be called not the "Zangezur Corridor" but the "Trump Route." However, Azerbaijan will use this road without obstruction, exactly as Baku had previously stated.

Without the involvement of the Trump administration, communications in the South Caucasus would have opened under a different logic and, in all likelihood, would have remained under Russia's general control. However, US involvement does not mean that Armenia's security is guaranteed, nor does it eliminate the threat to Armenia's self-defense from Turkey and Azerbaijan—whether through economic expansion or various

forms of territorial concessions, even under the pretext of demarcation and delimitation.

In the end, we see that the demarcation and delimitation taking place between Armenia and Azerbaijan are happening solely at the expense of Armenian territory.

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



## LETTERS

## Church-State Conflict Reminiscent of Early Soviet Period

To the Editor:

The grave church-state clash that is ongoing in Armenia continues to grow. These tragic events remind us of a similar situation happened 105 years ago, during 1921. The events of 1921 were carried on by Vladimir Lenin and the Soviet Communist regime of Armenia, during the Sovietization process.

As a juxtaposition of the events of January 1921 and the currently ongoing events in Armenia, I am excerpting an article from the book *Ararat in America* written by Benjamin F. Alexander:

"Both religion and nationalism, it is known, conflict with Marxist ideology, and the Soviet rules in Armenia, initially demanded that the people make instant and total breaks with both their national identity and all western-capitalist orientations

and liaisons. However, after the short-lived Tashnag rebellion of 1921, Soviet Premier Vladimir Lenin launched a more moderate program, the New Economic Policy (NEP), designed to allow for smoother transition and some latitude for the Armenians' Armenianness. Particularly complex was the relationship between church and the state. The peasantry still identified with Christian institutions, and curtailing their freedom of worship completely would clearly prove counterproductive to gaining their allegiance. The regime under Lenin, therefore allowed church services to continue, though at the same time sponsoring much anti-religious propaganda and forbidding the churches to do much more than perform their liturgies. The government seized nearly all of Echmiadzin Monastery's land, though not the monks' living and worship-

ing space. The government also supported schismatic impulses within the church: as a mean of weakening the spiritual influence of Echmiadzin; the Soviet government promoted a secularizing faction known as the 'Free Church' movement (akin to the 'Living Church' movement in the Russian Orthodox Church). The regime further sought to break the Armenians of some of their customs and traditions."

The events of 1921 started by Lenin had its ideological goals and objectives; the current ongoing events seem to have different goals and objectives. However the implementation strategies of the 1921 events and the current ones seem to be similar. Time will show how the events will develop and the extent of the goals achieved.

Avedis Boyamian  
Winchester, MA





## COMMENTARY

# About Ruben... and Indifference (A Personal Testimony)

By Vahan Zanoian

“It is not death that is frightening. What is truly frightening is indifference — a state that enters us quietly and gradually, like radiation, and destroys us from within.” — Ruben Vardanyan from a cell in the dungeons of Baku, December 17, 2025

At first I hesitated to write this article, because this topic is personal, and I have long advocated de-personalizing articles that touch upon inter-Armenian political affairs, and focusing instead on political issues rather than individual actors. But in this case, I will make an exception. I will speak about Ruben Vardanyan the person, as I’ve come to know him in the past 20 years.

Indifference has always been Ruben’s nemesis. In the office building of one of Ruben’s foundations, on 6 Baghramyan Street in Yerevan where we used to hold many meetings, in one of the conference rooms, on the wall, there is the following quote from Elie Wiesel, who was a member of the Aurora Selection Committee:

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.

The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference.

The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference.

And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference.”

One of the most unforgivable shames of our nation today is the fact that we casually accept the presence of Armenian political prisoners in the dungeons of Baku. I shudder to think how Ruben would cope with today’s Armenia and with the widespread malaise and indifference prevalent in the entire Armenian nation. If he were free, Ruben would not be silent about their fate, regardless of whether he liked, agreed with or respected them as individuals. He refused to leave Artsakh when he had a chance because he did not want to leave the others behind. I can personally attest to this through my conversations with him during the last days before his arrest. If he had the freedom, he would devote his resources — both material means and the influence of his global relationships — to secure their release. And his motive to help free his compatriots would go beyond the individuals involved: he genuinely believes, as I do, that it is not just the fifteen individuals who are on trial in Baku, but the entire Armenian nation. That would be the motivation behind his determination to act. And although there are individuals and NGOs concerned with the freedom of our prisoners in Baku, painfully there is no widespread public outrage, and no consequential effort from our own government to secure their freedom.

I first met Ruben Vardanyan twenty years ago, in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum. I was a moderator in some Davos discussion sessions at the time, and I was actively looking for Armenian participants. In the commotion of several hundred global political and economic leaders, I found Ruben Vardanyan. Even though relatively young, he was full of ideas and perfectly at ease in that global leadership circle. After the 2020 war we became much closer, and our relationship flourished into frequent meetings and discussions about the post-war Armenian condition, both in groups and bilaterally. I was with him when he took the decision to move to Artsakh. It was his decision, and his reason for taking it was nothing more than to try to prevent the depopulation of Artsakh.

The opposite of everything worth fighting for is indifference. And we seem to have lost the will to fight for the many just causes that we have fought for, and, because of that struggle, we have survived and maintained a sense of national identity. There are some pundits today who question the importance of our national identity, history and values. “Whose identity?” they ask sarcastically. “Mine, or yours?” “We’ve been sacrificing ourselves for 200 years defending this identity, isn’t it enough?” they ask. And the gullible members of our public buy the argument, not realizing that they are being led to the nation’s ideological slaughterhouse. (Paradoxically, what has reinforced the public indifference to the looming dangers to

our security and national values have been a series of successes in areas unrelated to security policy, driven largely by Diaspora initiatives, such as education, healthcare, science and technology).

Ruben is one of the most principled men that I know. He will not compromise his values. For him, red lines are red lines, not subject to negotiation. After over two years in the most gruesome conditions in Azeri jails, he dares to declare “Artsakh was, is and will be” from the very jail where he got incarcerated for his devotion to his historic homeland. That statement may sound naïve, reckless and irresponsible to some (in fact, to many) in Armenia today, but it is not. It is principled. It is faithful. It is more genuine than most of the hopelessly defeatist statements appearing in our public discourse today.

Ruben has issued several messages from prison, through phone calls to members of his family. On May 30<sup>th</sup> of 2025, in connection with Ruben’s birthday, there was a discussion entitled “Dialogue with Ruben” organized by Ruben’s friends and colleagues. I had the honor to be present at that session, and, in my talk, analyzed Ruben’s messages sent from prison. So, I will not dwell on them further here.

But it is impossible not to cite one of his prison messages: “I am ready to be at peace with myself until the end and be completely happy.” This, from a man, who has every reason to be bitter with the world, even, and especially with, the Republic of Armenia and with his compatriots.

Yet, since his incarceration, he has not issued a single bitter or negative word about Armenia or Armenians. He is the personification of the exemplary Armenian, a true patriot, holding on to his principles and national values, and not breaking under the severe physical and psychological stress that he is subjected to.

This, I believe, is at least one of the reasons why Aliyev decided to try him separately from the others. Another reason is the fact that Ruben is one of the most well-known and respected Armenians globally today. Through this trial, Aliyev wants to neutralize the phenomenon of Ruben Vardanyan, not merely his person.

The widespread indifference in Armenia today reminds me of the boiling frog metaphor, which is about how a frog thrown in boiling water would jump out, but one in cold water that is heated slowly will stay until it boils to death, indicating how people gradually adapt to evolving dangerous situations until it is too late. The truth is that in real-life experiments, even frogs in cold water, when gradually heated jumped out. But our nation seems to have adapted to the rising temperature of the water we’re in. The losses of the 2020 44-day war should have been the most significant increase in the proverbial water’s temperature and acted as a wake-up call. But they were somehow accepted as an inevitable outcome, and later constantly downplayed by the official rhetoric. Eventually, our losses were justified by the argument that we had been in the wrong fight all along, and that the defense of Artsakh had been an impediment to Armenian statehood. These arguments were used to scare the public with imminent new wars.

By the time the main shock, the actual loss of Artsakh came in 2023, the public had already been desensitized and demoralized, and lost interest in Artsakh, also through public rhetoric. The occupied strategic territories in Armenia proper, which, in any normal country would have been a major and constant issue of public discourse, lost their importance. During this time also came the removal of our key national symbols, the marginalization of the Genocide, the sidelining of history and its lessons, the downgrading of national identity, values and dignity, and,

more recently, the destructive and shameful conflict between the government and the church, and the increasing number of internal political prisoners in Armenia, which kept raising the temperature of the water further, while our nation was being drawn into a demoralized state of oblivious illusion about peace with our enemies and the promise of continued economic prosperity.

We are now at the point where we may not even have the strength to jump out. It may be difficult for many visiting Yerevan to believe this, but we are at that existential junction as a nation and as a sovereign state. The visible well-being in Yerevan and the economic and scientific progress, which give the public optimism today, can be lost in an instant.

This is the indifference that Ruben most feared. This is what he fought against, and what he sought to counter by example, by moving to Artsakh, fully aware of the risks and consequences of his decision. Since this article is personal about Ruben, I would be amiss not to mention his family, especially his wife, Veronika Zonabend, and son David Vardanyan. They have handled and continue to handle the most distressing conditions and heartbreaking news about Ruben with infinite grace, dignity and strength. Veronika continues to support the projects that she started with Ruben with great vigor and enthusiasm, such as the DWC Dilijan school, the Dilijan Church, the development of tourism in Tatev, Koris, as well as Dilijan, and many other projects.

An Armenia stripped of its national character and values is already defeated, even if in peace with its neighbors, because it would be a sterilized Armenia, a skeleton, just a map without a soul — indifferent to its history, culture, rights, identity and, most of all, to its national dignity. I know there are many who will mock these thoughts, and they will base their mockery on “what did we achieve with 34 years of senseless struggle,” but our history is much longer than 34 years. Our struggle is longer than three thousand years. 34 years is nothing but a blink in the history of nations. Nations prevail because they keep the will to struggle.

Ruben Vardanyan endures the worst physical and psychological treatment by his jailers without losing his faith. The prosecutor of the sham trials in Baku has demanded a life imprisonment sentence for him. But even that has not changed Ruben. His faith in struggling for a just cause has not died. Nor has his faith in restoring our national dignity in our Motherland, which cannot be measured by internationally recognized square kilometers. The true illusion is the “internationally recognized square kilometers,” and not the concept of our Motherland. The Motherland is real, it is historical, it is carved in stone, and it is carved in the collective memory of our nation. Even after all the attempts of the Turks and the Azerbaijanis to erase our history from Western Armenia and Nakhijevan and now Artsakh, the evidence exists and it is undeniable. To paraphrase Ruben, we were, we are, and we will be there.

Let me stress that this is not a call for war. Nor is it a negation of the benefits and dividends of peace. It is, however, a negation of the idea that we must rid ourselves of our national aspirations, just causes, history, rights, symbols and identity in order to attain peace. We cannot be indifferent to all that and remain independent. We cannot be indifferent to historical facts and our rights just because they are unattainable today. That won’t be peace. That will be indifference of the worst kind — it will be defeatism, surrender and compliance with the enemy’s demands. It won’t bring security, and it certainly won’t be Independence.

I am hopeful that Ruben will be reunited with his family and friends in the near future. Meanwhile, if the “Ruben Vardanyan Phenomenon” that Aliyev fears so much and is trying to neutralize inspires even a segment of the Armenian public, Ruben wins; and, by his example, he does more for our national cause from jail than most of our political actors have been able to do from their positions of authority.

Ruben Vardanyan endures the worst physical and psychological treatment by his jailers without losing his faith. The prosecutor of the sham trials in Baku has demanded a life imprisonment sentence for him. But even that has not changed Ruben.





## COMMENTARY

# Choosing Science

By Noubar Afeyan

Last fall, on an overcast morning during U.N. General Assembly week in New York, I found myself at a table of 30 people: CEOs, prime ministers, heads of international organizations. I'd been asked to lead a conversation about how governments and the private sector could work together to address some of the biggest challenges of our time: disease, hunger, poverty, climate change.

One of those gathered — a respected former head of state — brought up lenacapavir, Gilead Sciences' breakthrough new HIV drug. Lenacapavir protects against essentially all HIV infection through a twice-yearly shot — a significant improvement over the daily pills or more frequent injections that, until now, have been required in order to battle or prevent HIV. On the day of our meeting in New York, Gilead and several partners had announced agreements to deliver lenacapavir quickly and cheaply to patients in low- and middle-income countries, preventing perhaps hundreds of thousands of annual deaths.

The former head of state described this as a “man-made miracle.” That phrase stuck in my head.

Why? Partly because it is an apt description of what biotechnology, at its best, can do: miraculously consign to history some of the worst fates that befall humans — debilitating illnesses, devastating diseases. I think the other reason is because it acknowledges that these miracles are made. They don't just happen — they are a matter of choice. Acts of ambition and imagination, sometimes even desperation. These are not sudden miracles that come in a flash; they proceed step by step, if the science is sound and the conditions are right.

This past year, those conditions were under threat in the United States in ways I have never seen in my nearly 40 years in biotech, nor ever imagined I'd witness.

While we're closer than ever to realizing biotechnology's full potential to make miracles, we're also closer than ever to throwing that potential away. We're at risk of taking a sledgehammer to our miracle machine.

I'm reminded of the famous Charles Dickens quote: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” We stand at an inflection point between two very different futures: one of progress, and one of regression. In this letter, I will describe how we might end up in each and suggest how we can choose health and prosperity over disease and stagnation.

## The Good

I'll start with the potential: a series of 2025 human-made miracles that demonstrate how science — when allowed to work — can revolutionize health and longevity for millions, if not billions, of people around the world. Across medicine and biology, we saw breakthroughs that expanded medicine's reach in the body, made intractable conditions treatable, and offered a glimpse of a utopian future where compounding scientific miracles make each of our lives healthier, safer, and longer.

From a twice-yearly injection with the potential to dramatically curb global HIV transmission, to the first truly personalized gene-editing therapy developed to save an individual child's life, to clinical trials of organ xenotransplants engineered across species lines, the arc of progress gave patients around the globe new cause for hope. Scientists also crossed barriers that had long defined the limits of medicine itself, delivering therapies into cellular compartments like the mitochondria and pushing past the blood-brain barrier to treat neurological and other diseases. And new medicines for chronic disease began to replace constant intervention with durable treatments, reducing the need for frequent dosing, repeated procedures, and ongoing disruptions of daily life.

What unites these advances is the nature of what they mean for patients. These are not refinements of existing therapies or marginal optimizations, but expansions of where and how medicine can act, reshaping both treatment and what it means to live with disease. The advances I highlight here represent only a fraction of what emerged this year, and are only a preview of what is possible in the future. For readers interested in a more complete list of 2025's human-made miracles, we've captured them in a companion piece which you can read by clicking here.

In these breakthroughs I see the potential to systematically cure disease, heal the sick, and extend human “healthspan.” They promise to give millions of us the miracle of more time: the gift of longer, healthier lives.

But that future is not a given.

## The Bad

Every one of these human-made miracles was produced through the scientific method, the centuries-old process of hypothesis, experimentation, analysis, and iteration that allows us to turn the “unknown” into the “known.” This process is the greatest miracle-making tool humans have, and an engine of progress and prosperity — but today, it's under assault. And if we fully abandon its miracle-making power, I fear we are headed for a dystopian future of disease, deprivation, and decline.

The United States, where I live and work, has long recognized and embraced the power of the scientific method — and that has turned our country into the world's economic, technological, and defense superpower. Since Vannevar Bush argued in 1945 that scientific progress was the foundation for a flourishing society (and therefore a “proper concern” of the government), the U.S. government has invested — consistently, massively, and strategically — in basic scientific research, giving researchers across the country the tools they need to investigate promising “unknowns” and convert them to “knowns.” Our Constitution provides for patent protections with an express goal: to “promote the progress of science and other useful arts,” incentivizing inventors to turn scientific breakthroughs into products and goods that can reach and improve the lives of all people.

This is how Americans invented the telephone, the lightbulb, and the airplane; developed semiconductors, modern computing, and the Internet; and recently beat back a deadly pandemic to save untold lives and safely reopen our economy. It's how we produce 20% more corn than we did in 1930 — on 25% less land. According to some estimates, as much as 85% of all U.S. GDP growth since the end of World War II is attributable to advances in science and technology.

The computer or smartphone you are reading this on would not exist but for the scientific method; the banana you ate for breakfast would have been wiped out by a devastating crop disease years ago; and the flu you had last week might have presaged your funeral this week. We would all be poorer, sicker, and less safe. Technological and scientific dominance is the foundation not only for our country's economic prosperity but also our national security.

The U.S. has generally grounded its public policy in science for generations: we've banned lead-based paint that poisons young brains, set standards to keep contaminants out of drinking water, and taken action against cancer-causing tobacco. Science-based policy has unarguably saved millions of lives.

This is why it's so alarming to see the U.S. back down from its support for science. In 2025, the U.S. government effectively slashed funding for basic research, making fewer grants in every area of science and medicine and canceling thousands of existing projects. It proposed cutting the budgets of the National Institute of Health and the National Science Foundation by 40% and 56%, respectively. It eliminated hundreds of fellowships for up-and-coming researchers. And it instituted new visa policies that severely restricted the U.S.' ability to attract the best scientists from around the world and benefit from their research.

Slashing scientific budgets is disastrous. Even more disastrous is the rejection of the academic scientific enterprise, the severing of its more than 70-year partnership with the U.S. government, and the growing contempt for the scientific method. This both threatens future breakthroughs and turns back the clock on long-established, safe, and effective treatments for deadly diseases — diseases we thought we had consigned to history.

Skepticism is an important part of the scientific method. Debate about approaches and outcomes is central to how science works. But what we are seeing is skepticism that has curdled into an across-the-board, corrosive doubt in the scientific method itself. Not only that: some of the loudest voices are presenting their opinions as alternative scientific facts with no regard for mountains of data from rigorous experiments.

For the first time since the Enlightenment, this raises the question of whether the scientific method is still a viable way to organize and resolve disagreements in science. Do we look to the evidence? Or do we reach conclusions based on our personal opinions or beliefs, or what an “influencer” said, or what is convenient, or what is politically or financially expedient?

If we lose our ability to collectively resolve our skepticism through the scientific method, we won't just slow the miracle machine, we'll throw it into reverse. We won't just stop making new discoveries — we'll undo past ones. Consider, for example, the increasing rejection in certain quarters of the science that led to mRNA vaccines and many childhood vaccines. Who's to say the same pseudo-arguments won't apply to cancer treatments, or to anesthesia, or to germ theory?

It might sound alarmist to suggest that we could regress to 1900, when the average life expectancy in the U.S. was 47 years and the leading cause of death was pneumonia. But consider that measles — a deadly disease that was declared eliminated in the U.S. 25 years ago — will formally lose that designation if the 2,144 cases documented in the United States over the past year continue to spread in the weeks ahead. We are living simultaneously in the utopian age in which a baby born with a genetic death sentence is given a new lease on life thanks to the miracle of gene editing, and the dystopia in which a disease like measles is on the march in the United States. It's hard to square.

It is also — let's be clear — a choice.

The resurgence of measles is not the result of, say, a random genetic mutation. It is the result of choices, policy decisions, to turn our backs on decades of science. A choice by leaders to reject not only science but common sense.

Do we want to encourage more man-made miracles or risk man-made catastrophe?

## The Competition

At the same time that some in the U.S. are undermining the scientific method, the Chinese government has been investing heavily in it. In just the last decade, China has increased its spending on the scientific method through large-scale research and development by 400-fold. It has created regulatory frameworks and research infrastructure that enable its domestic biotech companies to advance innovation at a fraction of the time and cost of their American competitors. Between 2015 and 2018, the workforce at China's drug regulator quadrupled, allowing a backlog of 20,000 new drug applications to be cleared in just two years (by comparison, the FDA reviews only a few hundred new drug applications each year). The number of STEM Ph.D. graduates in China has soared from less than 10,000 in 2000 to more than 50,000 in 2022. And China has compiled high-quality and freely accessible data sets to train the AI models that will underpin the next generation of scientific discovery.

As a result, China is well on its way to overtaking the United States' historical lead in biotechnology. China's share of global biotech patents jumped from 1% in 2000 to 28% in 2019, ahead of the U.S.' share. The number of novel medicines under development in China has skyrocketed by 8x over the past nine years and is now almost equal to total U.S. output. Ironically, U.S. investors, who might have preferred to fund life-science innovators here at home, are now placing their bets on China. U.S. and other Western investment in China has reached \$150 billion over the past five years. In fact, roughly a third of all global biopharmaceutical licensing deals are now for Chinese-developed assets.

These advances by China come on top of existing obstacles to innovation in the U.S., such as long-outdated and overly onerous regulatory requirements and a lack of high-quality data sets to train science-focused AI models on. (For more on these obstacles, see this piece on U.S. innovation and competitiveness that I published last year). Last year, a bipartisan congressional commission warned that the U.S. will fall behind China in biotechnology if it does not change course within the next three years. And a task force at the Council on Foreign Relations — which I was proud to be a part of — issued a report arguing that biotech innovation is key to the future economic and national security of the United States.

If we continue to discredit and defund the scientific method, the U.S. risks becoming an innovation desert, reliant on China for new medicines and technologies and helpless to protect our own people in times of crisis, ranging from biological warfare to the next pandemic.

We risk losing much of the \$3.2 trillion the biosciences sector contributes to U.S. GDP every year and the 2.3 million jobs it provides.

And most terrifyingly, we risk our health and that of our loved ones. We risk returning to an era when a sneeze was so potentially dangerous that it became customary to ask for God's blessing after every sniffle. We risk not having an answer when disease strikes, and losing infants and children to diseases their vulnerable bodies aren't yet

see SCIENCE, page 20





## COMMENTARY

## MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

## Chronology of Turkey's Long War Against Its Minorities (1941-2007)

The Republic of Turkey often presents itself as a bridge between civilizations — a nation uniquely positioned at the crossroads of continents, cultures, and histories. Yet behind this polished narrative lies a far more troubling reality: a prolonged pattern of statesanctioned discrimination and mass violence against Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Assyrians. These minority communities endured policies and actions that systematically stripped away their security, dignity, and existence in the country.

The third and last part of my article presents some of these persecutions from 1941 to 2007, as documented by Turkish historian Ayse Hur:

— December 15, 1941: The Turkish authorities refused to allow the overcrowded Struma ship, carrying 769 Romanian Jews from Constantza fleeing Nazi persecution, to disembark in Istanbul on the way to Palestine. After enduring illness, starvation, and death for 2.5 months, the Struma was towed 23 miles offshore, without engines, fuel, food, water, or medicine. It was torpedoed and sunk by an unidentified submarine on February 24, 1942. Only a single passenger survived.

— November 11, 1942: Prime Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu's government imposed on the minority populations the notorious "Wealth Tax," one of the most egregious examples of economic persecution. 87 percent of the taxpayers were non-Muslims. Armenian merchants were taxed at 232 percent of their capital, Jewish merchants at 179 percent, Greek merchants at 156 percent, while Muslim-Turkish merchants were taxed at only 4.94 percent. Those unable to pay their taxes were sent to forced-labor camps in the country's interior. During the "Wealth Tax Tragedy," which lasted until March 1944, families lost their homes, businesses, and in some cases their lives. The law was eventually repealed, but the damage was permanent.

— 1946: For the first time, non-Muslim university graduates were allowed to serve in the military as reserve officers. However, since that time, not a single non-Muslim has been elevated to the rank of commander in the Turkish Armed Forces.

— 1946: The ruling political party issued a chilling internal report: "We must take serious measures, especially against the Greeks in Istanbul.... Not a single Greek should remain in this city by 1953, the 500th anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul." According to the report, "Anatolia should also be cleansed of non-Muslims."

— 1948: When Jews attempted to emigrate to the new State of Israel and Armenians to Soviet Armenia, the Turkish government and its loyal press -- which had done everything for years to drive them away -- began publishing articles that portrayed those who wanted to emigrate as "traitors."

— September 6-7, 1955: A large-scale, state-orchestrated pogrom unfold-

ed, primarily targeting the Greek population of Istanbul. However, the events spread to other cities, such as Izmir, Adana, and Trabzon. Armenians and Jews were also attacked. According to some sources, three people were killed, according to others 11, approximately 300 people were injured, and hundreds of women were raped. According to official figures, more than 5,300 buildings were attacked, while unofficial figures put the number close to 7,000. Estimates of the damage ranged from 150 million to one billion liras.

— 1964: As tensions escalated with Greece, Turkey unilaterally annulled the "Friendship Treaty" signed in 1930 between Turkish President Kemal Atatürk and Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos. Tens of thousands of Greek citizens, born and raised in Turkey, were forcibly expelled. They were allowed to take with them only one suitcase and a very small sum of money. With the departure of Turkish citizens of Greek origin, the Greek community was brought to the verge of extinction.

— 1974: By a decision of Turkey's Supreme Court regarding a lawsuit between the Board of Directors of the Bahklı Greek Hospital Foundation in Istanbul and the State Treasury, non-Muslim citizens in Turkey were officially classified as "non-Turks."

— 1984: The Phanar Greek Orthodox Patriarchate requested permission to close the Heybeliada Theological Seminary, stating that it could not cover its expenses. However, the Turkish government, which had been doing everything in its power to close the school until then, rejected this request, arguing that it was not possible to close it down under the Lausanne Treaty, other bilateral agreements, and the "principle of reciprocity." Today, despite having no students, the school's Turkish administrator, who was appointed by the Ministry of National Education, reports for work every day. The Patriarchate continues to incur expenses to keep the school open.

— 1985 and 1990: The Yazidis, who worship the Peacock Angel, were driven from their homes and forced to migrate en masse to Western countries because they refused to become village guards against the PKK.

— The 2000s: One of the central topics of the National Security Council meetings was "combating missionary activity."

— November 15, 2003: Two Turkish Islamist terrorists carried out suicide attacks on the Beth Israel Synagogue in Şişli and the Neve Shalom Synagogue in Galata, killing 25 people, including the attackers, and injuring more than 300.

— February 5, 2006: Father Andrea Santoro of the Santa Maria Catholic Church in Trabzon was stabbed to death by a 16-year-old Turkish boy.

— January 19, 2007: Hrant Dink, the editor-in-chief of Agos Armenian newspaper, was assassinated.

— April 18, 2007: In Malatya, seven Turkish nationalist youths raided the Zirve Publishing House, which published works related to Christianity, and brutally murdered three office workers.

The decadeslong record of discrimination, dispossession, and violence against Turkey's minorities is not a collection of isolated incidents but a sustained state policy that reshaped the country's demographic and cultural landscape. Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Assyrians, and Yazidis — communities rooted in Anatolia for millennia — were pushed to the margins through laws, intimidation, and outright brutality. Their numbers dwindled not by accident, but by design.

## The Ways Iran Regime Change Could Undermine Azerbaijan

By Michael Rubin

*Special to the Mirror-Spectator*

The Iranian people have had enough. Absent the ability of even traditional religious conservatives to feed their families, even Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's ability to restore order with brute force may not be enough.

Just as the Arab Spring reverberated beyond Tunisia, the Islamic Republic's fall could also spread to imperil other regimes. The Aliyev dynasty in Azerbaijan should be worried.

Dictatorships are bad at recognizing the reality around them. Autocrats surround themselves with sycophants and tolerate no dissent. They pay lobbyists, think tankers, and the occasional Texas congressman lavishly to repeat their talking points.

In Azerbaijan's case, this has led to the myth that Iranian Azeris represent "South Azerbaijan" and wish to separate from Iran. Such a narrative ignores both history and the fact that Khamenei himself is Azeri as are the most brutal units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Still, Iranian Azerbaijan is important. Tabriz was the epicenter of Iran's 1905-1909 Constitutional Revolution. That uprising against tyranny occurred against the backdrop of Iranian Azerbaijani newspapers and

civil society. Today, civil society is much stronger in Iranian Azerbaijan; in Aliyev's republic, its freedom of action hovers between that of North Korea and Eritrea. If the theocracy falls and Iranians of all ethnicities are allowed to organize and move on their desires, it is more likely that Iranian Azeris will agitate for change in Baku than that they would throw off the yoke of one dictator only to subordinate themselves to one as brutal.

Geopolitically, as well, the Islamic Republic's fall could be a death knell for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's whole brand is that it is an oasis of moderation and a

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staging ground for espionage and operations into Iran. If the Islamic Republic ends and an Iranian republic or constitutional monarchy emerges, both the United States and Israel will recalibrate their strategy to privilege Iran over its smaller neighbors. This would be a return to the twin pillars strategy that shaped US and British thinking into the 1970s when the United States

leaned upon both the shah and the Saudi monarchy. From a strictly realist policy, Iran is a bigger catch than Azerbaijan. Both the United States and Israel will encourage investment in Iran to help the country rebuild. In effect, Azerbaijan will be cut loose and, with neither Israelis nor Americans feeling they need Azerbaijan anymore, they will be less inclined to censor what they think about the region's most brutal dictatorship.

If Azerbaijan dares to sponsor separatist action in Iran, it is even conceivable that under a future administration, the US Department of State might even label it a State Sponsor of Terror, a designation it already deserves. Should sanctioned Iranian leaders and military officers seek to launder their cash through Baku as Russian President Vladimir Putin and his oligarchs do, then the chance of Azerbaijan remaining long off the Financial Action Task Force grey lists becomes miniscule.

While Armenians rightly have long memories and may neither forgive nor forget Israel's cynicism and its arms sales to Baku in the run-up and during the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, shifting geopolitical winds might lead Israel to cast its lot with Armenia, both as a fellow democracy and as a doorway into Iran. Whether in Julfa, Isfahan, or Vanak, cosmopolitan Armenian Iranians will become the gateway to investment and entry into the Iranian market and society.

What happens in Tehran will reverberate far and wide. Just like an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra launched a tsunami that devastated Thailand and Sri Lanka, the tsunami unleashed by the collapse of the Islamic Republic could destroy Aliyev's ambitions, decades of caviar diplomacy, and the United States', Europe's, and Israel's broader approach to the South Caucasus.

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



COMMENTARY

# Choosing Science

SCIENCE, from page 18

mature enough to withstand. We risk returning to the days when crop growth couldn't keep up with population growth and more went hungry.

While "longevity" is the current buzzword for those wishing to extend their lifespans, the reality is we risk living shorter, stunted lives if we retreat from science.

Our Choice

The hopeful news is that we can choose between the two futures I've described. There is still time. We can restore funding for basic enabling research; attract top international scientists to work in the U.S.; streamline regulatory pathways for innovation; build high-quality shared data sets; use government investment to get private capital flowing; and screen outbound U.S. investments in Chinese companies that raise distinct national security concerns.

We also can and should welcome skepticism from people who have doubts about scientific claims — but we must insist on doing so within the framework of the scientific method, with its basis in fact instead of

opinion. If we defend the scientific method and demand that skepticism be channeled through experimentation and data, we can protect the miracles we've already made and our capacity to make more.

This is more important now than ever, because I believe we are on the cusp of an explosion of new scientific miracles.

Last year, my annual letter described the new concept of "polyintelligence": the coming together of human intelligence with both machine intelligence and nature's intelligence. As AI models become increasingly sophisticated, they will help humans decode the incredibly complex logic and intelligence of the natural world, unlocking entirely new possibilities for miracles. At Flagship, we are working towards this future with one of our companies, Lila Sciences, which combines sophisticated AI models with autonomous robotic labs to allow AI to perform each step of the scientific method itself. Last year, Lila built a proprietary scientific corpus for its AI models with more than a trillion tokens generated from its platform and two years of autonomous experiments, laying the

groundwork for a future where miracles are not just man-made, but even partially machine-made.

We can live in that future. We can accelerate into a world of new miracles and build brighter, healthier, safer, and more prosperous lives for ourselves and our children. Or we can continue to throw a wrench into the gears of science and face the prospect of dystopia and regression. The choice is stark.

Faith

Miracles are more often associated with faith traditions than with science. You might think it sacrilegious, somehow, to characterize leaps in science as miraculous, as I've done here.

Yet the Bible describes faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." And this, to me, is not only a matter of the spirit; it also describes what drives scientists to propose experiments: the fact that something might be possible, might be solvable, might be proven. At the outset, every new hypothesis is a leap of faith. Every experiment begins with a guess at the shape of the unknown — a leap into the realm of possibility.


The United States, more than anywhere else I've lived or visited, is anchored in a faith in what may lie ahead. Faith in a better

future; faith in an ever more perfect union; faith in the human capacity to invent and innovate; faith in the power of democratic ideals; faith in the regenerative potential of immigration; faith in the search for truth; faith in science.

It was that uniquely American faith that first caught my imagination as a child living in Lebanon. As early as my twelfth birthday, I dreamed of one day attending MIT. I am not alone: I know such dreams have propelled thousands of other would-be scientists, engineers, and scholars in hundreds of other cities and countries around the world to look to the United States, to do everything they could to become part of the future that America uniquely creates — and recreates — through science.

In this new year, we must reclaim and recommit to that faith; that belief in science and the scientific method. Our advancement in every way depends on it. Our ability to adapt to a rapidly changing world depends on it. And without it, the miracles that deliver us from disease will occur elsewhere, or will never occur at all. The choice is ours.

(Noubar Afeyan is the Founder & CEO of Flagship Pioneering. This column above is his annual letter to the company and can be found on its website, [flagshippioneering.com](https://flagshippioneering.com).)




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## Armenia Authorities To Remove Russian Border Guards From Turkey Border Checkpoint

YEREVAN (News.am) — The Armenian authorities plan to remove the Russian border guards from the Akhurik border checkpoint on the Turkish border in the near future, a source in diplomatic circles said on January 13.

According to the source, the decision to hand over the Akhurik checkpoint to Armenian border guards has already been made and even a respective flagpole has been installed.

However, the Russian border guards will remain at the checkpoint.

The condition of the railway to Turkey is currently being assessed.

According to other some sources, the Turkish side has already begun construction on its section of the Margara border checkpoint with Armenia. Thus, on the one hand, the start of construction by the Turkish side, and on the other, the alleged commissioning of Akhurik, indicate the seriousness of the intentions to reopen the Armenian-Turkish border in the foreseeable future.

But in private conversations, Armenian law enforcement officials express concern about a possible increase in border violations. According to official data, 160 cases of illegal crossing of the Armenian state border were registered in 2024, compared to 78 cases in 2023. The number of cases increased by 82, or 105.1 percent.

These border trespassers are usually from "third world" countries, such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh, who view Armenia as a transit point.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that Armenia often shows extreme humanity by releasing them or granting them refugee status, as a result of which this flow of border trespassers increases, which is clearly shown by the abovementioned figures.