



HOPE AND THE **WANDERING SOULS** FROM **ARTSAKH**

REFLECTIONS ON A DELEGATION VISIT

BY MICHAEL PRITCHARD | AUGUST 2025



Armenia: Hope and the Wandering Souls from Artsakh

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International Christian Concern

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The Pink City and Armenia’s resilience.....	1
Lingering wounds from Artsakh.....	2
Relics and reminders that God is in control.....	4
Azerbaijan’s troubled path.....	4
ICC and American delegation.....	5
Homeless wanderers from Artsakh.....	6
Grave concerns for ancestors.....	7
A valiant cause: Center for Truth and Justice.....	8
All Artsakhis hope to return.....	9
Ethnic cleansing and forced exodus of Christians.....	10
A bulldozed heritage and legacy.....	12
Government efforts to resettle Artsakhis.....	12
Saviors in Svarants and beyond.....	13
Youngsters blossom at a school in Metsamo	16
The latest stop on the peace journey.....	16
The patience and resolve of Greogry	18

The Pink City and Armenia’s Resilience

The pinkish stones that compose many of the Soviet-era buildings in Yerevan, Armenia, give the city a unique charm. The buildings glisten in various tones and colors throughout the day and weather. They serve as an impressive backdrop to bustling Republic Square, the city’s epicenter for business and family gatherings, tourists, and never-ending traffic. A beautiful water fountain lightshow dazzles packed crowds on summer nights.

The lava rock symbolizes the Armenian people: Distinctive, resilient, and strong.

While rays of light bounce off the buildings in their unique hues, Armenians radiate the love of Christ borne of the first nation to officially embrace Christianity in the fourth century. Other parts of the world pursue other religions or no religion at all. Yet Armenia’s spiritual foundation, like the stone, is immovable. It has stood for generations, through obstacles and trials, wars, and foreign demagogues.

A staggering 97% of the population identifies as Christian, with more than 90% affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church, according to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Armenians proudly identify as Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals, Charismatics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, and more.

The Republic of Armenia and its heritage are seemingly threatened on all sides, its very existence, and Christianity for that matter, hanging in the balance. The land-locked country in the Caucasus Region has been here before — the Persians, Ottomans, Soviets, Turks, Arabs, and others wrestled their way in, staking territory and influence in a fight for the nation's soul. Yet here, like the illustrious pink stones and other reminders, Armenia stands.

The country of about 3 million people, which gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, wants to live in peace with the world, to decide its own laws, fate, and worship. To not be suffocated by outside influences, autocrats, and their armies. Other nations and dictators clamor for its land and resources, rob its people of their identity, chip away and steal its borders, redraw its boundary lines and maps, manipulate its trade, and desecrate its Christian sites and churches and cemeteries in Artsakh (also known internationally as Nagorno-Karabakh) and beyond.

There is optimism and pause after a recent [peace pledge](#) was signed, following nearly four decades of conflict, with much fanfare at the White House in August 2025. Yet, there is no love and distrust lost by Artsakhis and the Armenian people on the leaders and soldiers of Azerbaijan and their friend in arms, Turkey, which illegally closed its border to Armenia decades ago. Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev, 64, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 71, have scarce allies here.

Lingering Wounds from Artsakh

The most sensitive ongoing wound is Artsakh, an independent and disputed enclave within Armenia's borders, overrun and stolen from Armenia by Azerbaijan. This occurred after decades of conflict and a 40-day war between the countries in 2020. After a brief ceasefire and stoppage, the Azeris embarked on a nine-month genocidal blockade of the region, denying Artsakhis food, medical supplies, and other necessities. Azerbaijan finally steamrolled and took over the roughly 1,200 square mile, mountainous region on Sept. 23, 2023.

Some 120,000 indigenous Armenian Christians were forced to flee Artsakh. Azerbaijan claimed the land as its historical own and was destined to purge the region of all things Armenian.

The atrocities cut to the bone. Christians fled Artsakh, losing their ancestral lands, homes, communities, jobs, security, and more. Their march toward unknown corners of the nation on the second day was met with gut-wrenching tragedy as an explosion at a gas depot took more than 200 lives.

Those who fled the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh enclave still struggle to find their identity and assimilate in other parts of the country — about 20,000 landed in Russia, Belarus, and elsewhere — temporary homeless wanderers who pray and hope to return to Artsakh one day. Many have moved in with relatives and friends and are holding off on obtaining full Armenian citizenship. And they all want to return.

The Armenian government is doing a great deal to help. Foreign leaders are weighing in, the Trump administration now has a foothold in the southern part of the country, nonprofits are launching aid projects, and global Christians are praying and linking arms with their brothers and sisters who have suffered greatly.

Fresh memories and unseen scars still hang over many Artsakh Armenians who were part of the diaspora, a stifling black cloud as they move on. A malaise can wash over many, surfacing in unexpected ways, such as untreated trauma and anger. Grace, mercy, and forgiveness are a distant but necessary step, easier said and believed than done.

While the tumult of Artsakh in September 2023 displaced many Christians, they now fear for their motherland. Yes, the Azeri and Armenian leaders recently signed a document saying they will continue to work toward peace, with Nobel Prize-seeking President Trump looking on at the White House. It was certainly a step in the right direction, but it was based on economic and political motives, which ebb and flow with the politicians who hold power.

Armenians pray for an airtight permanent solution, one that holds Azerbaijan accountable for its many crimes, justice for its many victims, and peace on every disputed border — redemption for the sacrifice of thousands of Armenians. For now, Armenians see and hear of Artsakh cemeteries being bulldozed, churches and monasteries destroyed. Twenty-three Armenian prisoners and many more civilians are still in Azeri prisons.

Time will tell if this is a new, peaceful chapter. The world is optimistic, hopeful, and prayerful. Yet, Azerbaijan has referred to parts of Armenia as “Western Azerbaijan,” and Aliyev has claimed that Yerevan, the Lake Sevan region, and Syunik in Armenia are “historic lands of Azerbaijan.”

Azerbaijan and Turkey would love to cast aside the nation sandwiched between them or at least forge a permanent corridor through its heartland. While there have been endless hostilities and rounds of gunfire fired nightly by Azerbaijan across the border, in part to

intimidate and stoke fear, the recent signing has brought temporary rest and gives hope that better days are ahead. Long after the handshakes and smiles for the media and onlookers, will the tenuous accord hold?

Relics and Reminders that God is in Control

Like Armenia's centuries-old buildings laid with its unique pinkish stones, other relics remind Armenians that God is still in control. Sprinkled across the landscape, near monasteries, graveyards, and churches, are stone narratives: khachkars. At the center of khachkars are crosses carved into the volcanic rock, accompanied by other ornate symbols and stories from Biblical tales and the stories of Armenian heroes of the past. Christian and Armenian promises that, given the weight and thickness of the khachkar relics, will be kept and passed to future generations.

Mount Ararat in Turkey, which can be seen from Yerevan and about 20 miles from Armenia's border, has white peaks that also serve as a majestic reminder that God chose this sacred place to start civilization anew: "... and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat (Genesis 8:4)." Noah and his family of eight were grounded somewhere in this region after the flood eons ago. Although the mountain and land were gifted to Turkey by Soviet leaders a century ago, Armenia stays under its comforting, Biblical shadow. This is holy ground.

Like the illustrious pink jewel lava stone in Yerevan and elsewhere, the mighty khachkars propped against the ancient walls of epic monasteries, Mount Ararat is an anchor in a historically hostile place.

It is a bastion of stability for the remnants of Artsakh and all Armenians, proclaiming that God still has them under his care, now and since the dawn of time.

Azerbaijan's Troubled Path

Azerbaijan was listed in International Christian Concern's (ICC) 2025 Global Persecution Index as one of the worst persecuting countries. It was also included on the 2024 Special Watch List by the U.S. Department of State and is becoming increasingly authoritarian, according to Dr. Michael Rubin, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and Director of Policy and Analysis at the Middle East Forum.

"Azerbaijan isn't merely a dictatorship, it's a dictatorship that is increasingly considered less free than Russia, less free than Iran," Rubin noted as he briefed an American delegation to Armenia on geopolitics of the region. "It's a dictatorship that is increasingly on par with Eritrea and with South Sudan. It's still a little bit above North Korea, but it's going in that direction. It really, really is a problematic country now."

President Aliyev, who was elected under questionable circumstances in 2003, has continually worked to expand his powers while suppressing citizen rights. He led a referendum to abolish term limits and declared himself the victor in every election. Aliyev has used his vast oil and gas reserves to leverage on the global stage while denying basic religious freedoms and other human rights. Azerbaijan's State Committee on Religious Associations implements strict measures on houses of worship, and religious leaders have been arrested and detained on spurious charges.

Many say Azerbaijan is a wealthy autocratic bully, its coffers filled with oil riches and support from Israel, Turkey, and the United States. Azerbaijan's GDP was \$72 billion in 2023 compared to Armenia's modest \$24 billion. Yet, the Azeri wealth is hoarded at the top, as Armenia has a higher per capita income rate of \$8,390, compared to Azerbaijan's \$7,284, based on 2024 data from the World Bank and World Economics.

"When it comes to Azerbaijan, when you look at the Caucasus ... look at the per capita income of Georgia, of Armenia and Azerbaijan," Rubin said. "As poor as Armenia is, as blockaded as Armenia is, as little natural resources as Armenia has, their per capita income is higher than Azerbaijan's."

Much of the disparity is caused by government corruption, Rubin and others note, despite Azerbaijan bringing in tens of billions of dollars from oil. Wealth can be found in Baku, yet there are villages on the outskirts that have had no running water or electricity.

Azerbaijan's modern military has complete dominance over Armenia and its skies. Armenia may be an increasing leader in technology and AI, but it's hamstrung by aging infrastructure and beleaguered from years of war. Without security guarantees from the United States or European allies, Armenia could again be overpowered by its aggressive neighbor. Recent Trump successes to secure an American-led transportation corridor in southern Armenia make that less likely.

ICC Joins American Delegation

International Christian Concern (ICC) has served believers in Armenia on several fronts and raised \$80,000 to help families who fled Artsakh with food, clothing, and other necessities. In 2024, under the Global Magnitsky Act, ICC's advocacy team filed a sanctions packet with the U.S. Department of State against leaders at two Azeri prisons that violated human rights and tortured Christians and others.

Nothing has happened — yet. The State Department must weigh myriad contributing factors, including high-level politics, trade and arms agreements, and resources that often override blatant human rights abuses. ICC has also chronicled the persecution of Armenian believers through several reports and daily news posts. Two ICC staffers

accessed Artsakh in 2022 and got past the Lachin Corridor blockade, listening to and serving Christian families and reporting on their desperate attempts to survive.

A week before the August peace agreement was signed, ICC was part of a U.S. delegation to Armenia in summer 2025 sponsored by Save Armenia, a Judeo-Christian alliance, and the Tufenkian Foundation, a charitable nonprofit started in 1999 to address the challenges of people of Armenia and Artsakh.

Collectively, the distinguished assembly of Christian leaders and their organizations have helped people escape the Taliban, rescue orphans in Nigeria, serve in Syria and the Middle East, draft legislation to punish oppressive regimes, and so much more. They are doers on the global stage who, along with their network and donors, roll up their sleeves and make a difference in the world with integrity, compassion, and skill.

The team met with high-ranking government officials, including Armenia President Vahagn Khachaturyan, toured breathtaking monasteries, heard heart-wrenching survivor stories, and visited impressive Tufenkian Foundation housing and school projects designed to help Artsakhis heal and thrive.

In the delegation were ministry-minded, servant leaders from Wallbuilders, Mercury One, Save the Persecuted Christians, Shai Fund, World Relief, and ICC. Also in the group was Nadine Maenza, co-chair of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable and chair of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE). Maenza was the former chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and is passionate about bringing IRF and FoRB communities together. Craig Simonian, a local pastor and regional coordinator for the Peace & Reconciliation Network, and Rev. Dr. William Devlin, a global crusader whose motto is “live simply, so others can simply live,” were also part of the group.

The delegation was joined by Alexander Chmelev and Antranig Kasbarian from the Tufenkian Foundation and its team, as well as Matias Perttula and Dan Harre from Save Armenia.

All are committed to rescuing, serving, and coming alongside the oppressed who clamor to be heard and yearn for justice. Several members of the American delegation attended the peace pledge at the White House one week later.

Homeless Wanderers from Artsakh

Mariam* sits near Vernissage in downtown Yerevan. In this popular open-air market, where locals and tourists comb treasures of handmade crafts, chess boards, jewelry, and

souvenirs along rows of neatly tented tables, the summer heat and humidity give little respite.

It's hard for Mariam to discuss Artsakh without getting emotional. Tears flow easily. Born and raised in Artsakh, she said it was a special enclave, where, in places like Stepanakert, the capital of Artsakh, everyone knew each other. It was like a family. A quick errand and walk down the street that should take 10 minutes "will take about 40 minutes because you meet so many people you know, you'd hug, it was that kind of atmosphere."

She savored the highland harvests of wheat, barley, and grapes; the bounty sold in open markets and local stores.

"We had amazing wine, mulberry," Mariam said. "Artsakh mulberry vodka is known all over the world. Even with that stony, difficult soil, we managed to cultivate and get the harvest that was necessary."

She now lives in Yerevan, which boasts about 1 million. The contrast is striking. While it's been roughly two years, she can feel like an outsider, a temporary wanderer who smiles and puts on a façade and loves anyone who crosses her path. Yet, the unease, memories, and longing from Artsakh are constant. It hasn't been easy to integrate. She, like many of the thousands who fled Artsakh, hopes to return.

"There are a lot of good people [in Yerevan], and they try their best to help us overcome wounds, trauma," Mariam said, adding that she lost two coworkers in the second Artsakh war. "But in any case, we need time to integrate. We need time to overcome all these difficulties, because we cannot accept the fact that we have lost our land, the land of our ancestors, the graves of our grandparents, great-grandparents. I know where my great-grand or great-great-grandparents are buried, because I went there and saw it ... it's now difficult to feel that you will not see it anymore. I don't want to accept it, and I have a hope, and I believe that God will help us to go back to our land, to see our cities and villages, to see our churches again."

Grave Concerns for Ancestors

Artsakhi Armenian journalist Anna* aches for the day she and her family can return. It pains her not to be able to visit the grave of her father, who died 17 years ago. He is buried in an Artsakh ancestral cemetery alongside his parents, uncles, and brother in the village of Sos. Anna, who was displaced along with her family, covered the forced exodus and the horrors of the gas station explosion for ICC and other ministries.

In discussing her homeland of Artsakh, Anna recently wrote, "Perhaps the deepest and most painful wound is the impossibility of burial in ancestral lands. The graves of relatives,

the resting places of those left behind in Artsakh, are out of reach. All my compatriots share the pain of being unable to visit the graves of loved ones. Every displaced person now carries their own memories of those left behind.”

Anna said funeral ceremonies that she and her mother now attend near Yerevan, can bring unexpected solace, comfort, and camaraderie among weary Artsakh sojourners.

“The forced exile has transformed these ceremonies into one of the few places where displaced Artsakhis still gather, where social bonds endure despite the loss of communal life,” she said. “In this fractured existence, funerals have become hubs of encounters and connections.

“Since the forced displacement, my mother attends these services frequently. Far-flung acquaintances, relatives, even distant neighbors — people she has not seen since school days — come together under these somber roofs once every week or so. These rites weave a fragile web of community from the scattered remnants of lives once shared. Especially when the elderly pass, my mother returns home more composed — sometimes even somewhat soothed.”

A Valiant Cause: Center for Truth and Justice

The Center for Truth and Justice in Armenia was established five years ago to capture evidence and testimonies of survivors of the Artsakh skirmishes. Its team of lawyers, including Lilit Harutyunyan and Sharmagh Mardi, has listened to and recorded the experiences of more than 100 victims. The young nonprofit seeks justice for the war and other crimes chronicled during the ethnic cleansing. Harutyunyan shared the painstaking details of visiting the villages near Azerbaijan’s border and talking to Artsakhis who continue to suffer.

Before the recent agreement to pursue peace, Armenian villagers in the southeastern border region near Azerbaijan faced constant threats. Azeri soldiers took up high positions overlooking the villages and commandeered land occupied by herders who relied on the animals for their livelihood. Some villagers have left the area. Harutyunyan and colleagues saw firsthand the dangers the families faced.

“The gunfire appears consistently at specific times,” she said, adding that it’s been shots in the air or at certain buildings. “For example, 10:20 p.m. every night, 12:20 p.m., every night, 2:40 [a.m.], 5:00 a.m. ... Families have lived in constant fear, especially the children. We were present when the gunfire started. We were collecting testimonies from the victims.”

Harutyunyan was afraid for the young children, ages 6 and 8, and the teen sisters next door, including a 14-year-old who was having nightmares because of the gunfire. This was a daily

occurrence for the family and villagers who were under siege. Sources say the gunfire has abated since the peace pledge.

Fomenting fear, disrupting life for the Armenian villagers, and pushing villagers away from the border has been the game plan of Azerbaijan.

All Artsakhis Hope to Return

A gathering of several dozen professionals from humanitarian aid groups, ministries, the private sector, government, and survivors from Artsakh, gathered on the ground floor of the Tufenkian Hotel in Yerevan one evening to meet and share ways they can support Armenians and the Artsakh diaspora.

Armine Alexanyan, former deputy foreign minister of Artsakh, who met privately with the American delegation earlier in the week, summed up the feelings of many. She said that if everyone worked together, no matter the circumstances and challenges, Artsakh would again be under Armenian rule one day.

“It's important to stay loyal to your beliefs, to your homeland, and work hard, even when it seems to be impossible to implement what you have planned,” Alexanyan told the group. “But God creates miracles, right? So, I believe that miracle will be created, but God only helps those who help themselves. So, unless we work hard, even God won't help us. So, I really hope that we and our friends, and I hope every one of you will become our friends, will bring that day closer.

“And I know that every Artsakhi wants to return to Artsakh, not under Azerbaijani rule, not without any security guarantees, but I know that every Artsakhi I meet on the streets of Yerevan, the only question they ask is, any news? When are we returning? So, I really hope that we can work in that direction. Those who write, write about it. Keep it on the agenda, and not forget that there were Artsakh, that there were atrocities, that there were our churches, which we had to abandon, like we abandoned our homes, otherwise, we wouldn't be alive and talking to you now.

“And one day, I believe we will go there. Or we believe all our lives dreaming about the homeland we once lost ... I really hope that I will tell my children and my grandchildren a different story, and while telling that story, I will be home. And I will always consider not Yerevan Armenia my homeland, but it's not my home. It's my homeland. My home is there in the Artsakh Islands, and I want to return there one day with all my friends who are sitting here from Artsakh.”

Sitting near Alexanyan was Artak Beglaryan, who was blinded by a landmine explosion outside his family's home in Stepanakert, Artsakh. Beglaryan said their stories from Artsakh

haven't been heard or told internationally. He was grateful for the gathering of supporters for "being our voices and helping us amplify our voices. We believe that with your support with Christian value-based passion, it's possible to tell our truth and reach justice."

Beglaryan said Artsakhis want to return to their ancestral land but do it strategically.

"First, to protect our cultural heritage, our churches, our cemeteries and our homes, because [Azerbaijan President] Aliyev, very actively, is destroying everything there physically in Artsakh under their occupation.

"The second strategic goal is to release our hostages, because they are under Azerbaijan in jail, because they are Armenian and they are Christians. They are our leaders. The third one is to keep the Artsakh people in Armenia. It's our moment. We need to live here with dignified and sustainable conditions. And for this, we also need international support, because Armenia and Armenians lack resources.

"And the fourth one is justice. We want justice. It's both for our sustainable and dignified peace in the region between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, not only Armenia and Azerbaijan, but Armenians and Azerbaijanis. But also, it's very important for other people in the world. It's important for international world order. So, we want justice. And we hope that you can help."

Several Artsakh survivors shared painful memories privately with the delegation. One young woman told how she desperately searched for her missing sister, only to see her mutilated body displayed in a video posted by bragging Azeri soldiers. She tracked her sister's body and her killers on social media, finding the Azeri military unit responsible for the crime.

Another young man shared about his desperate search and plea for his kidnapped brother. A third survivor shared her family's struggles, living during the blockade and siege of the Lachin Corridor.

Ethnic Cleansing and the Forced Exodus of Christians

Azerbaijan was always a threat to Artsakh. Yet, the complete collapse of the enclave by the outmatched Armenian military in a lightning strike took many by surprise. The exodus by Christians formed one of the largest migrations of an ethnic group. While 120,000 were forced to flee, 42 brave souls allegedly stayed and eventually fled as well.

Some Artsakhi families, displaying the love of Christ, left notes in their homes for the occupiers. They forgave them. There were still God-fearing people in Azerbaijan who had no hatred or animosity toward their neighbors. Like Armenians, God was still drawing them to

himself. It was the leaders, the regime, and the machinations of the highest levels of Azeri government and military that Armenians despised.

Still, leaving Artsakh was gut wrenching.

Eric Hacopian, an Armenian journalist who hosts a daily YouTube podcast, “Insights with Eric Hacopian,” told the delegation there were significant challenges for the tens of thousands of Christian Artsakh refugees to resettle.

He said the refugees fell within three distinct groups:

- **“About 40% of the population are urban people.** Now urban people in general are very easier to integrate because you go from one city to the next ... It’s always hard, but if you work in the phone company in this city, you can go to Y city near the same firm at many places. And obviously, when there's a refugee crisis, early on there's a lot of sympathy. There are a lot of people who want to help ... So, the urban people, which is about 40%, to a great extent have integrated themselves.
- **“The second most vulnerable group,** which is always the most vulnerable group in every part of the world are single women and children. In this case, when husbands die in war. The family structures in places like this tend to be far more solid than the rest of the world. So, you essentially have war widows with young children, and everywhere in the world, when there's not a man in the household ... there are a thousand problems that come with it. This also includes single elderly, which is a rarer occurrence in Armenia, but usually also war related. There'll be a 70-year-old woman who's lost both sons and her husband. There's not a single person from [that area] who's not lost someone in a war over the last 25 years. So, this is the most vulnerable, but it's a problem that can be solved with money because these people need a place to live and a job.”
- **“The last group, which is by far the hardest group, are rural families,** which are probably another 40%, 45% of refugees. And these tend to be people with large families. They'll have four or five kids. These are people that have lived on the same land for sometimes hundreds if not thousands of years, and suddenly, they're somewhere else, and they don't have their farm. One thing, as you know about farm folks even in the United States, you go back 450 years and there were people living in places where they weren't part of the cash economy. You grew your own food, and you could take care of yourself. And these are people whose worlds have been shattered. If you're a man who is working 18-hour days on your farm, and now you're a refugee someplace, staying in some school, it's much more difficult because at the end of the day, you not only need to find these people work, but they don't have the skillset for a lot of urban modern work.”

Unlike in other countries that face mass displacement, in Armenia there's a "you're not going to leave anyone on the street" mentality, Hacopian said. So, many refugees have family and social networks "and that's actually something to me admired, in a way, where people take care of each other; but it also hides the problems."

Even in the best of family dynamics and situations, the refugees aren't going to be welcome in others' homes and stay forever.

A Bulldozed Heritage and Legacy

Azerbaijan's leaders have proven with their actions that they want to erase Armenia's legacy and any vestiges of its existence. Azerbaijan faced international condemnation for bulldozing an entire cemetery in the Nakhchivan enclave near the town of Julfa.

Thousands of beautifully carved khachkars were destroyed. When confronted with satellite images, photos, and videos, some Azeri leaders denied that there was ever a cemetery or Armenians there.

According to the Armenian Bar Association and Caucasus Heritage Watch, satellite imagery shows that 110 out of 127 cultural heritage sites, churches, monasteries, schools, and monuments in Artsakh have been destroyed, damaged, or threatened. Azerbaijan is also removing domes from churches and defacing stone inscriptions.

Azeri soldiers proudly posted videos and bragged about the destruction and their crimes on social media.

Government Efforts to Resettle Artsakhis

It has been nearly two years since the forced exodus, and government officials continue to partner with citizens, the private and public sectors, and international NGOs to help families assimilate. The challenges are daunting.

Narek Mkrtchyan, minister of labor and social affairs, and his team have the difficult, yet meaningful task of ensuring that government funds and support are allocated to housing, job development, mental health services, and other essential areas.

Mkrtchyan, who has visited Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort and attended his January 2025 inauguration, holds a master's degree in political science and international affairs from the American University of Armenia. In addition to government jobs, he has served as a professor and lecturer at Yerevan State University. He has also taken part in research projects and conferences at prestigious universities and research centers in the United States, Germany, France, Norway, Iceland, Estonia, and Georgia.

In the Government House 3 conference room, the 36-year-old Mkrtchyan said the country is “witnessing a lot of challenges.” He is grateful that “citizens understand the situation,” the complexities of bringing home an entire region and populace. A comprehensive needs assessment was published in June 2024 and helped shape his agency’s short-, mid-, and long-term goals.

Flanked by agency officials, Mkrtchyan presented graphs and charts detailing the progress made in aiding the 100,000 families now in broader Armenia. Measures have focused on securing housing, job placement and training, as well as support services. He said about 11.4 billion dram, or \$29 million American dollars, has been doled out so far for social aid payments.

Another \$223 million was distributed over 18 months, \$130 per month to 104,000 individuals. Rent and utility aid were distributed to vulnerable refugee households over seven months, \$104 per month for the head of household and \$26 for each family member. In addition, more than 2,100 certificates were given for new houses or refurbished apartments, plus support to repay existing mortgages. Many of the government’s efforts have been to rebuild and strengthen communities near the border areas.

Working in tandem with nonprofits, the government has also extended services for children, women, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities. These include long-term care, day care, home care, foster care, and rehabilitation services.

According to the needs assessment, support was needed for 49,964 males, 52,884 females, 9,000 persons with disabilities, 30,000 children, and 12,404 elderly. The government receives an average of 85,000 phone calls per month for help.

Saviors in Svarants and Beyond

Syunik is the southernmost province in Armenia and is near the Azerbaijan border. It’s about a five-hour drive from Yerevan along the Artashat Highway/E117. The bustling traffic of the nation’s capital gives way to rolling hills and more isolated communities with rectangular stone homes, horses and livestock, crop farms, and small apiaries. It passes through the Nakhchivan enclave. Vacated bunkers dot the hills on both sides of the road, remnants of earlier battles and positions between courageous soldiers.

The dusty hills lead to a verdant landscape, featuring deep gorges with streams and meadows, serpentine switchbacks, and striking cliffside edifices that some say date back to the Stone Age. It is arguably the most stunning scenery in all of Armenia.

Nestled in this area is the tiny village of Svarants, close to the Azerbaijan border and near the Lachin Corridor, a stone’s throw from the iconic Tatev Monastery, which dates to the

ninth century. Young children ride their bikes along dirt roads and through vibrant wildflower-strewn fields.

Aesthetically, Svarants' beauty is pure gold. Economically, however, the village is faltering. Some say the community once had about 600 inhabitants. Yet census data show a population of about 360 in 2001, 270 a decade later, and an estimated 100 today — with most being older than 50.

On the outskirts of town is a new, planned neighborhood created by the Tufenkian Foundation, a model it hopes to replicate and scale nationwide. With the support of donors and the government, the foundation is building 20 new homes and refurbishing five more for families displaced from Artsakh. Occupants will have a small plot for farming or beekeeping. It's exactly the type of project championed by the government, but not without its obstacles.

The homes' concrete bases, laid above the dirt in rows like toppled dominoes, give promise and hope for the future. Bulldozers move dirt as villagers and visitors look on. They imagine the ripple effect this project, situated amid the rich agricultural land, will have on the community, fresh faces and resources, bonding and growth that can lead to more homesteaders and vibrancy — hopefully, ecotourism, perhaps an athletics field, and a modern library to follow.

Antranig Kasbarian, who holds a doctorate from Rutgers University, has been active in Armenian affairs for most of his life. He has served with the Tufenkian Foundation since 2003, formerly as its executive director and current board member and director of development. He's professionally gifted with a gentle demeanor and kind heart, who has dedicated his life to improving the lives of others, particularly those who have suffered at the hands of the Azeris.

Kasbarian noted that the Syunik province has the fourth-largest population of Artsakh refugees in part because many Artsakhis passed through the Lachin Corridor during the mass exodus in 2023 and stayed in this Syunik area.

"Some had family, some just didn't want to go further and just stopped" in Syunik, said Kasbarian. "They felt comfortable enough to stick around, and they're there." Of the refugees scattered throughout Armenia, "corralling them and bringing them back to Syunik is a heavy lift, because of the security situation, and because there's mistrust to the Army and government. Many blame the Army and government for being too soft and allowing this ethnic cleansing to happen."

He noted that that wasn't necessarily fair; that other forces at work led to the overthrow of Artsakh. He said the Tufenkian Foundation, under the leadership of philanthropist and

businessman James Tufenkian, is focused on serving the refugees and helping them assimilate.

“The Tufenkian Foundation doesn't try to be everything to everyone,” Kasbarian said. “We try to focus on what we think we can do to move the needle. James is very much about filling vacuums and doing things that others cannot or will not do.”

While the government focuses on helping individuals and families, the Tufenkian Foundation wants to build and scale these small Svarant-like communities. To replicate the neighborhood housing model in other areas while keeping each area's unique charm.

The challenge, in part, has been convincing families to move to Svarants near the Azerbaijan border. Will the Azeris raid this area as they've threatened to do? Will the Artsakh refugees lose their homes and family members again? The government wants to bolster the border with a greater Armenian presence, homes, and villages. Yet fear is an ever-present competing force.

In addition, there is skepticism from outsiders, defeatism, and “battle fatigue” among refugees, noted Kasbarian. While 20 to 25 new and renovated homes is a drop in the bucket, the foundation wants to start somewhere small, in Svarants. And prove that the concept and model can be cloned elsewhere. It takes a village to raise a village.

They've interviewed about 200 families, carefully selecting a well-rounded group that can give back to Svarants, a plumber here, a teacher there. The rural, rolling landscape is ideal for farming, beekeeping, or other cottage industries.

“We've already renovated the drinking water supply for the entire village because we don't want to create jealousy between old and new,” Kasbarian said. “We're now going to renovate the community center and health planning clinic. We are going to do other things, 21st-century things like provide solar water heaters for every house in the village, because the village is not gasified.

“The village relies on electricity and wood-burning stoves. The government is not prepared to gasify them anytime soon. So, we're working with UN partner agencies to install solar water heaters in every house. Obviously, the next step is after we house these people, you have to find them livelihood opportunities. And in most cases, that's not going to be giving them jobs. In a few cases, there will be jobs.

“For in most cases, it's going to be giving them economic development support, so they can set up farms or beekeeping or greenhouses or other cottage industries. This has been a hard road for us to get this project off the ground, but we felt this is so important because almost no one else is doing this kind of resettlement or collective resettlement work.”

Youngsters Blossom at a School in Metsamor

About 22 miles outside Yerevan is the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, Armenia's sole nuclear power plant and the only one in the South Caucasus. The plant was built in 1969 in the small town of Metsamor, where its workers have lived ever since. For families, it has been a hardscrabble existence, as the plant closed for several years during the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving workers behind who lacked the necessary job skills to pursue other things. Kasbarian said the area had fallen into poverty.

The plant has since been resurrected and modernized, and the Tufenkian Foundation has established a center for after-school programs in the community to serve families.

The school is tucked around the corner of one neighborhood. It features modern, well-appointed rooms with wood-lined walls and joyful children and teachers. The positive energy is electric, with many singing and inspiring lessons, art classes, and encouragement. There's even a separate puppet theater for the center's famous children-run traveling show.

It is also a home for children from Artsakh. Bright-eyed youngsters who are captivated by gifted educators and loving teachers. A haven from the past hurts and harms. The center and school provide an integrated approach to the government and Foundation's efforts to heal the scars from Artsakh, the emotional flotsam that can surface in unexpected ways.

Early children's artwork at the center features dramatic lines and drawings, often depicting tanks, bombs, and the horrors of war. Darkened shadows and strokes of the brush release feelings of fear and anger hidden in young souls.

More recent drawings, however, show bright colors, flowers, and sunsets, as well as a vibrant family life. It's a dramatic reminder of the difference a school and center can make, and the comforting love and warmth of teachers who support every stroke of the healing pen.

"This center, I think, carries a peculiar blend of social work, Christian virtue, and is grounded in the life of the people," Kasbarian said. "We try not to descend but work with people horizontally. It's truly one of the more beautiful projects that our foundation has funded, and we stick by their side to this day."

The Latest Stop on the Peace Journey

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met Friday, Aug. 8, 2025, at the White House under much fanfare and the gleeful attention of President Trump to sign a joint [document](#), technically the "Agreement on Establishment of

Peace and Inter-State Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan.”

The fact that leaders from both countries were in the same room and talking was a positive triumph. The declaration and its 17 articles, however, were more of an economic decree and a commitment toward future peace, rather than a binding deal with significant teeth. The media and world may have swooned, but many Armenians knew better. Their perception of the event was marred by years of wars, stolen land and borders, and deep distrust of an enemy whose wealthy lobbyists spew propaganda and rewrote history.

The week before the White House gathering, Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturyan hosted the American delegation in his Presidential Palace in Yerevan and said he was optimistic that a future peace deal would be signed — the two countries agreed earlier to one in principle — and that it would be a good thing for Armenia and the world. No one would dispute that such a signed agreement would be a positive step, a salve for a hurting region.

Khachaturyan said, “(While) we have adopted the peace plan ... we need to protect our identity, freedom, and independence. Armenia must protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty.”

He added that Armenia has spent 6% of its GDP, or 25% of its budget, on strengthening its defenses. This, he believes, helped keep Azerbaijan in peace deal talks. That and the Trump administration’s helpful interest; Trump has been much more engaged in the process and peace than the previous administration, Khachaturyan noted.

ICC Staffer Jay Church, who has long covered Christian persecution and geopolitics in the region, said that despite media reports to the contrary, the document was not a peace agreement.

Rather, he said, it was a joint declaration affirming the importance of working together toward a final peace deal and emphasizing the importance of forging peace between the fractious countries. The United States-pushed agreement lays the groundwork for economic investment in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and sidelined Russia, which has historically served as mediator between the two countries.

Yet some analysts noted that the agreement sidestepped critical issues, including the protection of religious heritage sites in Artsakh annexed by Azerbaijan, and the release of Armenian hostages. Azerbaijan continues to demand that Armenia amend its constitution to reflect that Azerbaijan, not Armenia, claims ownership of certain territories. This is the crux of the ongoing dispute and the fodder for wars. President Khachaturyan said U.S. experts were weighing in and helping his administration analyze the Armenian Constitution.

The signed agreement opened a transportation and communication corridor for Azerbaijan through Armenian territory to its Nakhchivan enclave. The economic corridor — now named the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) — gives Azerbaijan a direct land route to its ally Turkey, via Nakhchivan's western border with that country. The specific route through Armenia is still uncertain.

Unfortunately, what was signed does not protect Armenian cultural and religious sites in Artsakh, including centuries-old churches and monasteries that were vandalized or destroyed. Nor does the agreement preserve the Christian heritage — a striking omission given the systematic erasure concerns raised by international cultural organizations, noted church.

Equally troubling is the lack of concrete provisions for the release and safe return of Armenian prisoners of war and civilian detainees, despite repeated calls from the U.N., the European Parliament, and human rights groups. The agreement's silence on this humanitarian issue leaves dozens — possibly hundreds — of individuals in indefinite captivity, prolonging the suffering of their families.

The Patience and Resolve of Greogry

Gregory the Illuminator is a larger-than-life Christian figure in Armenian tradition and the first leader of the Armenian Apostolic Church. He is credited with shepherding the nation toward Christianity in the fourth century.

The road wasn't easy. When Gregory refused to make a sacrifice to the king's pagan goddess, he was imprisoned and tortured. Gregory was thrown into a pit where he stayed for 13 years, surviving with the help of a widow who dropped bread to him from a small window. Visitors today can climb a narrow stairwell into the same pit at the base of the Khor Virab monastery near the Turkish border.

Upon his release, Greogry led the king and the nation to Christ.

Armenia has been embroiled in many wars. Ultimately, the Second Coming of Christ will bring lasting rest to this nation and region.

Until then, the continued path toward peace, the commitment of international allies, and the steadfastness of the Armenian people, are the widow and its saving bread.

With God's continued watchfulness and blessing, this nation will survive.