

Ararat Center For Strategic Research Provides Perspective Of Critical Issues

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Armenia based political scientist and strategic analyst Armen Ayvazyan was in Southern California earlier this month giving a series of lectures and book presentations on the internal political situation in Armenia and the security risks it faces. During his visit, Asbarez's Allen Yekikan sat down with Ayvazyan to talk about the Ararat Center for Strategic Research, its mission and its activities. Ayvazyan, who holds a PhD in history and political science, is the director of the Ararat Center for Strategic Research.

The following is the full text of the interview:

Allen Yekikan: Let's start with the obvious. What is the Ararat Center for Strategic Research? What is its purpose, and mission?

Armen Ayvazyan: The Ararat Center for Strategic Research was established two years ago. The major objective of the Ararat Center is to serve as a platform that will bring like-minded Armenian professionals together to organize, step by step, the creation of the Armenian strategic school of thought.

Basically, the primary aim of the Ararat Center is to analyze current developments in the international political arena that pertain to, or affect, Armenia's interests and, based on those findings, to define the needs and demands of its national security.

The Ararat Center also conducts research and analysis on issues related to Artsakh, Javakhk, Genocide recognition and denial, Diasporan affair, and military security.

A.Y.: Who is your research and analysis for, the Armenian Government, non-governmental organizations?

A.A: Well, our research will be of use to Armenian decision makers, basically the government and political and business elites, as well as the general public.

A.Y.: The Ararat Center seems to be a foreign and security policy think tank. Will it only be working to affect change in Armenian political thought or will it also seek to influence ideas in the broader international arena?

A.A: We want the Ararat Center to emerge as a force that can influence Armenian issues on a global scale, not just in Armenia. One of the primary goals of the Ararat Center is, through active publication, to neutralize the growing anti-Armenian propaganda launched internationally, on an almost daily basis by Azerbaijan and Turkey. It is not easy and requires a concerted effort to steadily increase the international community's awareness of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh's positions in a comprehensible way.

A.Y.: Does the Ararat Center currently have any projects or initiatives to counter the obvious bias toward Armenian issues in Foreign Media?

A.A.: Our latest project is an online project called the Foreign Press Review (<http://artmamul.ararat-center.org/>) The FPR is actually geared directly toward countering Turkish-Azeri influence in the international press. It is an unprecedented project in the Armenian reality. The FPR brings regular people, academics, professionals, analysts and journalists together to

collect and translate important foreign media articles related and relevant to Armenia and Armenians, as well as the region at large.

Priority is given to materials on security and foreign policy issues, including the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and the current international discourse on the Armenian Genocide.

A.Y.: What do you hope to accomplish with the Foreign Policy Review? What progress has been made thus far?

A.A.: We hope the project will serve as a platform for healthy and constructive debate and will facilitate the advancement of Armenian political thought.

We have already posted many articles that have been translated into Armenian from American, Russian, British, and Turkish sources and we are expecting translation from the Arabic news sources. Some volunteers have expressed their desire to occasionally provide us with translations from Arabic and Persian sources.

A.Y.: Can people in the Diaspora get involved and contribute to this project? If so, How?

A.A.: Sure. We would greatly appreciate the participation of anyone who is willing to help and there are several ways to participate. Along with the work the Ararat Center Staff does on this front, FPR participants are invited to comment on the facts and opinions expressed in each article that we flagged.

The participation of the Armenians from around the world could actually be very multifaceted and dynamic. They could provide us with the actual articles; they could translate the articles themselves; or just simply comment on the articles. All of these ways are acceptable and will be appreciated.

A.Y.: Earlier, you explained that this program was unique, how so?

A.A.: Well, the project is really an exceptional opportunity for the Armenian public as well as the decision makers in our society to be informed on how the international press is depicting Armenia and Armenian issues. The project will also provide opportunities for Armenian intellectual circles to become acquainted with the international communities dominant opinions, analysis, and perceptions are on our issues.

A.Y.: Are there any other projects the Ararat Center is working on?

A.A.: We have also begun a summer school course this July that is available to Armenian students from the ages of 19 to 28. The Summer school will center on Armenia and the region in the current international political system.

This is a very important project, since the basic knowledge about Armenian security issues is still not comprehended by Armenia's youth, as well as by its decision makers, the elite and the society at large.

Armenians are still very weak in identifying and recognizing the threats to their national security and they heavily relying on foreign research and analysis, which is in many instances not only incorrect, but also misleading.

We need to analyze and teach our own Armenian issues by ourselves, independently. We need to identify the threats and the means to counter these threats, again, by our own independent capacities. Otherwise, we will always be supplied with biased and insufficient analysis. So this school is going to

provide to young Armenians, perhaps for the first time, the latest and most recent product of Armenian thought on our strategic security, historical issues.

We also provide direct links to the original sources of the articles, so that those who cannot read Armenian well can go and read the article in the original language. At the same time they can try and use this opportunity to learn more Armenian, to enrich their knowledge of their national language.

A.Y.: What are some topics or issues you will be teaching or discussing during the summer school?

A.A.: We are going to talk about Azerbaijani and Turkish propaganda in the international arena, as well as ways to counter this propaganda. We hope that these students will eventually use the knowledge we impart on them to produce quality work for the good of the nation.

We are doing this rather time consuming job with very scarce human as well as financial resources.

We also have the Ararat Center Blog, which is another project we have begun and it includes many activities, including video interviews, TV interviews, talk shows, radio interviews, lectures and so on. Our readers themselves can also participate by commenting on each issue.

A.Y.: The Government doesn't provide public grants?

A.A.: No the Government doesn't provide financial assistance in the form of grants. We are not supported financially by any government.

A.Y.: Why is that? Does it not see the value of the research and analysis the Ararat Center provides?

A.A.: No they do see the value; they appreciate it too. But they do not support us, at least they haven't until now. Hopefully, sooner or later, they will come around and support us, but who knows when or whether or not they will.

A.Y.: Are there other think tanks like the Ararat Center operating in Armenia right now? What issues do they work with?

A.A.: We have several think tanks working on internal and external political issues. Three of those think tanks are state run, while there are many that are supported by other foreign grants or perhaps internal grants.

But I can say that the Ararat center is unique in its analysis of the international and internal security issues by taking interests and security of Armenia at the at the heart of all of its research.

For us, the analysis of everything is conditioned by the interests of Armenia's security. The focus is Armenia's security and I think this makes us unique from one side, and from the other side, I think our professionalism in the manner in which we analyze has also been noticed and appreciated by the public both in Armenia and the Diaspora.

A.Y.: What type of research has or does the Ararat Center usually publish?

On what issues have you been working?

A.A.: Until now the Ararat Center has concentrated and focused mostly on military security issues, on the Artsakh and Javakh issues. We have several important publications and books, as well as anthologies of articles.

"Studies on Strategy and Security," which has actually received the best book award in Armenia, contains more than 20 articles and analysis on regional military forces, Artsakh and the liberated territories, the significance in ensuring the national and military security of Armenia and balancing the military security situation in the Caucasus.

Some of the articles in the book deal with Military Psychology, Armenian-Turkey relations and its psychological perspectives, on Armenian military history, the Armenian Turkish war of 1920, and Artsakh war.

One of the articles in this book was written by the first commanding chief of forces in Artsakh, General Arkady "Komandos" Der-Tatevosian.

We have also published a translation in Armenian of the classic book on military energy by the famous Chinese strategist Tsun Tsu.

The Ararat Center has and continues to write and publish book reviews. Some very important reviews we have done, for example deal with the much-propagated book "Black Garden" by British author Thomas de Waal. The book is completely biased and incorrect in its analysis and conclusions. It takes the traditional so-called American neutral and middle ground and sacrifices the truth along the way. This middle way is only superficial, and although it is seen as unbiased, it is in fact not. De Waal's book is very pro Azeri and Anti Armenian. Unfortunately the review we did is in Russian and there are no resources to translate it right now.

Another recent publication was a translation of British author Norman Copeland's "Psychology and the Soldier," which is a classic on military psychology. This book was very well received in the Armenian army and although it was written during World War II, it still represents a clear presentation of many applied psychological methods and issues that armies deal with.

A.Y.: I want to turn to the situation on the ground in Armenia. What are some of the security threats the country faces today?

A.A.: Well first we need to make it clear that what happened in February and March in Armenia, with a disputed election, riots, and a violation of the Artsakh cease-fire, show the lack of awareness on the part of the Armenian public about the existential security threats that Armenia faces.

The Armenians do not now understand, or clearly comprehend what could happen if Azerbaijan attacks and succeeds in overtaking Artsakh. Such a scenario would automatically result in the fall of Syunik (Southern Armenia) and without Syunik there is no Armenia. Without Artsakh there is no Syunik. This is an elementary concept, which is not being recognized. The Armenians, and the Armenian political elite, or part of this elite, does not recognize or realize the whole breadth of the Turkish animosity toward Armenia. They do not assess correctly the Turkish policies towards Armenia and they also do not comprehend the dynamics of the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azeri relations.

Instead they hope for an unbelievable and incredible breakthrough to occur, again counting on western analysis and ideas about regional integration and Turkey soon becoming a member of the European Union.

A.Y.: So what are the dynamics of Turkish-Armenian-Azeri relations?

A.A.: Turkish animosity will not end in the near future. The objective of Turkey and its junior ally Azerbaijan is not only the occupation of Artsakh, But the destruction of Armenia as a country, as a state, and as a nation.

But this threat is not being recognized. Otherwise, both the public and the authorities, or at least segments of public and elite, would have behaved much more responsibly, and would have mobilized their resources for building a real democratic society in Armenia, built on social justice and the fundamental of democracy.

A.Y.: Do you think its the responsibility of think tanks, or research centers like the Ararat Center to push government and society to see this reality?

A.A.: Absolutely, we need to raise awareness, to analyze the possible developments and to give correct, or more correct prognosis.

A.Y. Some may argue that, in the Diaspora, we know or understand even less the threats that Armenia faces. But at the end of the day, how can one teach the new generation in the Diaspora what they don't know, and how can the Diaspora be engaged and activated the Diaspora, to prepare them for the threats that lay ahead.

A.A.: There has only been one practical way of engaging the Diaspora.

Unfortunately until now that engagement has been about the issue of genocide, which after Armenia became independent, in fact, ceased to be the number one issue of Armenians and Armenia.

he recognition of genocide by international community is the only visible front where the Armenians of Diaspora could have acted before Armenian became independent, but after independence the situation on the ground has completely changed and after that the approaches to Armenian Diaspora relations and the priorities of lobby activities should have been revised and reviewed more thoroughly.

Until now Armenian lobby organizations in the US, continue to work mostly toward the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Ninety percent of the Diaspora's events are devoted to the Genocide issue. It shouldn't have been this way.

Armenia's security, Artsakh, Javakhk, and Armenian-Turkish relations should have been dealt with much more actively and proactively and they should have been protected on information front in the international press. No article, for example, representing the Armenian position on Artsakh has ever been published in the leading journals of international studies in the west.

We brag about the powerful Armenian lobby in the United States, but I don't agree with such assessments.

A.Y.: What do you think needs to be revised in the Diasporas lobbying policies or strategies? And Why?

A.A.: One example, is the Armenian Lobby's goal for pressuring Turkey, through the US, to open its end its blockade of Armenia and open its border.

These organizations have, however, never tried to raise the question of ending Georgia's blockade of Armenia's railway coming through Abkhazia.

Turkey can resist American pressures and keep their border closed, but Georgia cannot resist American demands.

Russia would like to see this border opened, Armenia would like to see it open, if America were to pressure its juniors ally Georgia to open it, then we would not even need the Turkish border to be opened. The Turkish blockade wouldn't be felt the way we feel it now.

On the other hand, the opening of the Turkish border at this stage could have detrimental affects on Armenia's economy, national security, psychology, demography and her cultural perceptions and so on.

I'm not propagating the closure of this border, but it should be opened only if some preconditions are met.

A.Y.: What are those preconditions?

A.A.: The border should only be opened when Turkey changes its attitude toward Armenia; when turkey does not pursue the same hostile policies toward Armenia. Only after that, could the opening of this border have some positive affects on Armenia.

I also think the Diaspora's organizations should revise their policies when they talk about the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Genocide Recognition should be very effectively tied up to the real needs of Armenia; to the situation on the ground; and to the security of Armenia, otherwise we have now, some 20 states, which have recognized the Armenian Genocide, but have not revised their policies towards Armenia.

We have Canada and Poland, which have recognized the genocide but so what?

Have their policies on Artsakh and Armenia changed? No. Has France's position on the Artsakh issue changed? No. These countries still do not recognize the right of the Armenians to have secure borders, and to have Artsakh free of any Azerbaijani threat. In that regard, we are failing to capitalize on the issue of these international recognitions of the Armenian Genocide.

But because both the Armenian state and the Diaspora have been concentrating on the Genocide issues, we fail to see the real issue. You know, we can lose Armenia tomorrow and have the Genocide still be recognized by the world. Who cares about recognition after Armenia is destroyed? Turkey itself will recognize the Genocide and start making movies about it when there is no Armenia and when the Armenian nation is destroyed and spread all over the world. So the priorities should be reviewed again, revised. We have no time; we have lost a lot of time.

A.Y.: Based on what you are saying, it sounds as though there might be a vacuum, or a void in Armenian political consciousness. Do you think we need to start having a real dialogue on these issues?

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