

# Armenia



## GEOGRAPHY

Armenia covers 11,500 square miles in the southern Caucasus, an area slightly larger than the state of Maryland. This landlocked republic is bordered by Georgia to the north, Turkey to the west, Iran to the south, and Azerbaijan to the east and southwest. Its population is 3.2 million, 98 percent of whom are ethnic Armenians.

Much of Armenia is a rugged plateau of ridges, narrow valleys, extinct volcanoes, and small rivers and streams. The climate is varied: mild and cool in the highlands and hot in the semi-arid lowlands. Lake Sevan, the nation's largest lake, is surrounded by extinct volcanoes. Known as Armenia's "pearl," Lake Sevan serves as the main reservoir for the country's irrigation system. Armenia's main rivers include the Araks, which flows into the Caspian Sea, and the Hrazdan, which flows from Lake Sevan into the Araks in a series of majestic waterfalls. The Hrazdan provides Armenia with hydroelectric power.



The Ararat plain is now the most densely populated area in Armenia, and, with irrigation, supports crops such as fruit trees, apricots, and vineyards, from which Armenia's famous cognacs are made. During the Soviet drive for industrialization, most of the country's forests were cut down. Although an ongoing reforestation project has repaired some of the damage, the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the resulting blockade, forced Armenians to turn to this new growth as a source of heating and cooking fuel. Economic hardship brought the nation's once-flourishing manufacturing sector to its knees, but due largely to the military truce called in 1994, Armenia is now on its way to economic recovery.

Yerevan, Armenia's capital, is home to one-third of the country's 3.2 million inhabitants. Nearly 200 mineral springs in the surrounding countryside attract tourists to local health resorts and spas. Arzni, Bjni, and Dzhermuk are especially popular areas for patients seeking to treat minor ailments. Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark is said to have landed, is located in what is now modern Turkey, but remains the Armenian people's most treasured landmark. It rises to a height of 16,804 feet and is visible from nearly every region of the country.

Armenia and its eastern neighbor, Azerbaijan, have troubled relations, due mainly to the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-dominated enclave inside Azerbaijan.

# HISTORY

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The first historical reference to Armenians comes from the Hittites, whose chronicles mention the Armenian kingdom as early as the 14th century BC. The modern Armenian state, however, traces its origins to the ninth century BC, when several scattered kingdoms were first united under King Arame. Its capital was at Erebuni, near present-day Yerevan, to which it gave its name. The kingdom fell to the Medes in 610 BC and, 60 years later, to the Persians. With the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of imperial Rome, Armenia was slowly drawn into contact with the West. In 301 AD, King Trdat III embraced Christianity as the official religion of Armenia. (See below, “Religion,” for more information.)

Because of its location between the Roman Empire and the Parthians (and, later, the Persian empires), Armenia was strategically important. Between 190 BC and 387 AD, these ancient superpowers clashed repeatedly in attempts to gain control of the kingdom. Caught in the middle, Armenia was eventually partitioned out of existence in 387 AD.

In the seventh century AD, Arab armies defeated the Persians and threatened Byzantium. Armenia fell to the Arab caliphate in 642, and its leaders—realizing that the Islamic Arabs were far more flexible than the domineering Byzantines—made their peace with the caliphate and supported it against Christian Byzantium. In return, Armenia was recognized as an autonomous state within the new empire.

Armenian loyalty was rewarded by Caliph al-Mu’tamid, who agreed to recognize Ashot Bagratuni as king of the Armenians. Sixty-one years later, his successor, Ashot II, was named “king of kings” over all the other monarchs of the Caucasus. The medieval period of Armenian history, which begins with the founding of the Bagratid Dynasty in 861, was a time of great prosperity; the economy thrived and the arts flourished. Yet it was cut short when conflict again arose between the caliphate and a resurgent Byzantium.



*Mt. Ararat, located in Turkey*

The remainder of the medieval period in Armenia was marked by succeeding waves of invaders: Byzantium annexed it in 1045; the Seljuks, in 1071; and the Mongol hordes, in 1236. The elite eventually prospered under the Mongols, however, engaging in trade along the newly secured routes through central Asia to India and China. As Mongol power and influence in the region began to wane, Armenia was, once again, left vulnerable to raiding nomadic tribes. The death blow came with the invasion of

Tamerlane’s hordes, c. 1400, which caused Armenian noblemen, their armies, and their people to flee southwest to take refuge in the mountains. Armenia entered a dark age under their rule—just as the Renaissance was born in Western Europe.

Armenia hardly fared better in the 16th or 17th centuries. Persia conquered it in 1502, placing Armenia in the middle of a century-and-a-half-long tug of war with Ottoman Turkey. Without a native ruling class, Armenians were relegated to the status of a voiceless minority, unable to lobby successfully for their own interests in imperial circles. This did not stop the Armenian Church from sending missions to Christian monarchs in search of aid, however; one of which visited Russia’s

Peter the Great in 1701. Although that Russian tsar mounted an expedition into the Caucasus in 1722, his death three years later precluded serious Russian intervention.

Russia would not be drawn into the Caucasus again until 1762, during the reign of Catherine the Great, when its rivalry with the Ottoman empire—whose advance into the area could have cut off Russia's profitable trade route to the Persian empire—spurred a renewed interest in Armenia. For the next 150 years, until the eve of World War I, Russia's foreign policy in the south was determined by its rivalry with the Turks. Another of Europe's great powers was drawn into the conflict, as well: Great Britain worried that Russian expansion threw the weight of its support behind the Turks and Persians. The Armenians, who by now believed that their best chance to gain autonomy was through their powerful neighbor to the north, were again caught in the middle.

By 1828, however, Russia had conquered all of eastern, Persian Armenia and had begun to implement policies aimed at integrating the nation into its vast empire, including the establishment of Russian-language schools. Armenians under Russian control still fared far better than those under the Turks. With the outbreak of war in 1914, Turkey allied itself with the Central Powers against Russia and, in 1915, orchestrated a campaign against its Armenian population. More than 1.5 million Armenians were killed; those remaining were forced out of Turkey and scattered throughout the Middle East. In 2007, the U.S. Congress considered a resolution that would have recognized the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians by the Turkish government as genocide. The resolution gained a good amount of support, but was eventually tabled because of concerns that it would damage the U.S. relationship with Turkey.

Armenian culture thrived during this period, however, particularly in the diaspora (referring to those Armenians—or any other national or ethnic group—who settled in countries other than their ancestral homelands). Over the centuries of constant invasion and turmoil, many Armenians had fled their native soil to establish themselves under more peaceful conditions. These expatriate communities, stretching from Europe to India and the United States, kept Armenian language and culture alive.

Armenia gained a short-lived independence in 1918; in 1920, it was annexed by the Russian Republic and remained part of the USSR until 1991.

## POLITICS

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In 1991, the population of Armenia overwhelmingly voted for full independence from the USSR in a national referendum. Armenia again emerged on the world map as an independent country. Levon Ter-Petrosian, leader of the Armenian National Movement (ANM), was the first elected president of the newly independent Armenia. The ANM initially emerged in 1988 as a movement for unification with Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-populated region of neighboring country Azerbaijan.

In 1995, the Constitution of Armenia was adopted through a popular referendum. It is similar to the French Constitution and calls for building an independent judiciary. A new national currency was introduced, and successful fiscal policy and newly established mechanisms of financial regulation allowed the currency to remain viable and stable. As a result, the financial system of Armenia



*The Armenian flag*

remained virtually untouched by the dramatic financial crises in Russia in the 1990s, despite close economic connections.

Despite these successes, however, it quickly became clear that the implementation of change would eventually be undermined by the geopolitical realities surrounding Armenia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region located within the sovereign territorial borders of Azerbaijan, but populated by ethnic Armenians, has been a critical issue in Armenian politics. In both Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, there have been numerous ethnically motivated incidents, which claimed the lives of hundreds of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In 1991, the hostilities evolved into a full-scale war. A cease-fire was negotiated in May 1994, after the Armenian armed forces secured control over Nagorno-Karabakh and several other Azerbaijani territories. At present, Armenia occupies approximately 15 percent of Azerbaijan. The war extracted huge human and financial resources, and caused devastation and impoverishment in Armenia. One of the most prosperous republics of the former Soviet Union, Armenia rapidly declined into poverty and mass unemployment. The population gradually started losing its confidence in the implemented reforms. Privatization of industry proved to be largely ineffective, leaving hundreds of enterprises idle.

In 1997, efforts were made by Armenia and Azerbaijan to find a compromise. The negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, moderated by the chairmen of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk group (co-chaired by the U.S., Russia and France), concentrated on the "step-by-step" plan for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. The peace agreement was supposed to be internationally guaranteed. The fate of the land corridor connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh and Nagorno-Karabakh's final status was left for future negotiations.

At the end of 1997, Presidents Ter-Petrosian of Armenia and Aliyev of Azerbaijan signaled their approval of the plan, causing a political crisis in Yerevan in which Prime Minister Kocharian, Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, and the Minister of the Interior and National Security Serzh Sarkisian—all war heroes—opposed the proposed solution. The confrontation led to the disintegration of the ruling team. Encouraged by the "triumvirate" of Kocharian and the two Sarkisians, a large number of deputies in the Parliament defected from an ANM-led coalition in the Parliament, and the ANM lost majority. Ter-Petrosian chose to resign.

After the resignation of Ter-Petrosian, Robert Kocharian ran for president as the candidate of the victorious governmental party in the pre-term presidential elections. The former president of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Kocharian was considered one of the main architects of the "victory" in the Karabakh war. Kocharian best reflected the nationalistic sentiments of the public awakened by the public debate over Ter-Petrosian's "treacherous" politics. He took a hard-line position in the negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh and rejected the "step-by-step" approach.

These appeals to nationalist sentiments did not bring an easy victory to Kocharian in the 1998 pre-term presidential elections. Karen Demirchian, who was the head of the Armenian Communist Party from 1974 to 1988, emerged as an extremely powerful challenger. A large segment of the electorate supported Kocharian out of nostalgia for the years when he was the head of the Armenian Communist Party, a time when living standards were far better. Many were also drawn to his left-center ideology, as well as to his charismatic personality. Kocharian was able to win only in a second round of elections. Subsequently in parliamentary elections in 1999, the parliament managed to

consolidate power, and constrain the president's power by transferring authority to the prime minister, who relied on the parliamentary majority.

Armenia was plunged into chaos on October 27, 1999, when five gunmen burst into the parliament building and assassinated Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, Speaker Karen Demirchian, and six other members of Parliament. Whatever the motives of the gunmen were, they destroyed the ruling majority. The assassinations were a severe blow to the young and fragile political institutions of the country. In long and difficult negotiations between the Presidential administration and Parliament, important compromises were finally reached. On November 3, the brother of the slain Vazgen Sarkisian—Aram—was appointed Prime Minister. He suited the governmental camp as a figure that could preserve the balance between different factions of the ruling team. Despite the apparent normalcy in the country's political life, the subsequent six-month period was a state of diarchy, in which two camps—the presidential palace on the one hand, and the governmental camp, based on the parliamentary majority on the other—each tried to take control over the executive power. President Kocharian finally got the upper hand in the conflict, thanks to his constitutional authority to dissolve Parliament, which he did in June 2000.

In May 2000, President Kocharian sought to bring to an end the stand-off with his opponents by dismissing his critics from the coalition government. Kocharian was able to build up a new, pro-presidential majority from the presidential loyalists and the defectors from Miasnutyun. President Kocharian was re-elected in March 2003, in an election which the OSCE said fell short of international standards.

Parliamentary elections in May 2007 left Parliament in the hands of pro-governmental parties, with 87 percent of the seats going to parties aligned with the President. Presidential elections were held in Armenia on February 19, 2008. After two consecutive five-year terms, President Kocharian was required to leave office by the constitution. This step on the part of Kocharian was an important one, signaling a peaceful transition of power and a good sign for Armenian democracy. Kocharian had anointed Serzh Sarkisian as his chosen successor. Former president Levon Ter-Petrosian decided again to run for office, despite the unsuccessful conclusion to his previous presidential term. During the campaign, opposition parties and candidates accused the government of denying them equal time in the media and of harassment. After the election, Sarkisian was declared the winner, with a slim margin that allowed him to avoid a run-off. Supporters of Ter-Petrosian claimed widespread fraud and several thousand people took to the central square of Yerevan to protest the results. International observers initially gave support to the election results, but subsequent checks showed variances with the reported results, some of which could have changed the outcome. Elections in 1995, 1999, and 2003 also indicated irregularities. The 2007 parliamentary elections, however, showed improvement in the election processes.

Post-election protests continued to grow in the streets, with several thousand people in the streets for nearly two weeks after the election. On March 2, the government began enforcing a state of emergency in the capital. Security forces opened fire on demonstrators who refused to leave the square. The death count was put at eight, although some estimates were higher, and hundreds of people were sent to hospitals for treatment for gunshot and other wounds. The state of emergency remained in effect for 20 days, during which time the government controlled the media and police had license to disregard many basic civil liberties. Ultimately, Serzh Sarkisian assumed the office of president in April 2008.

Armenia's human rights record continues to be poor, according to U.S. Department of State reports, which indicate some improvements, with serious deficiencies remaining. Corruption is an issue, as are arbitrary arrests and detentions of political figures. Limitations on press freedom as well as harassment of press were also cited in reports.

Armenia's economy has grown substantially since 1991. Data from 2009 indicates that the gross domestic product is now \$8.71 billion, with inflation at 3.4 percent annually. Approximately 70 U.S.-owned companies do business in Armenia, including a number of high-tech firms.

## RELIGION

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In the first century, Bartholomew and Thaddeus—two disciples of Jesus Christ—evangelized in Armenian territories, resulting in widespread conversion to Christianity. In 301 AD, King Trdat III adopted Christianity as the state religion, making Armenia the first country to do so. The church at that time was known as Armenian-Gregorian—after “Gregory the Enlightener,” or Grigor Lusavorich, the first Catholicos, the supreme spiritual head of the church, and Patriarch. Lusavorich was declared a saint after his death.

The church has been a unifying force for the Armenian people throughout centuries of foreign invasion, occupation, and forced migration, during which belief in Christianity remained strong despite efforts to stifle religious practice. The Armenian Church is an independent entity, ruled by the Catholicos and located in Echmiadzin, about twelve miles from both the Turkish border and the western edge of Yerevan. Estimates are that 90 percent of the population is at least nominally affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Armenia's religious leaders chose to combine nationalism with religion as a way of preserving their native language and culture during the Soviet era, when the Communist party encouraged Soviet republics to adopt atheism instead. Since the 1980s, Christianity and the national church have been regaining popularity, and many young people are returning to the church. There are Armenian churches throughout the United States.

## CULTURE

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The Armenian alphabet was created in 405 AD by St. Mesrop, a monk and scholar. It has 39 letters, three of which were added to the original version during the Middle Ages. The language itself belongs to the Indo-European family and is spoken today by the nation's Armenians, who make up 98 percent of the population. Other ethnic groups include Georgians, Greeks, (Christian) Kurds, Yezidis, and Russians.

Armenians have several important national holidays: April 24 is a day of commemoration for the Armenian Genocide; September 21 is Independence Day, which celebrates secession from the USSR; July 5 is Constitution Day, commemorating the 1995 adoption of the new Constitution of the Republic of Armenia; April 7 is the day of Motherhood and Beauty; and December 7 is the day of Remembrance of Victims of the 1988 Earthquake.

Having lived across the land from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea, Armenian cuisine draws its influences from many different cultures including Russian, Persian, Greek, Arabic, and Turkish. The

everyday table in Armenia is generally spread with bread (paper-thin flatbread called *lavash* and/or flat white loaves) and soups or stews. *Spas* is a yogurt-based soup with grains, while *barisa* is a thick chicken and wheat soup. *Khash*, a special tripe soup, is popular in the winter months. Also common are starch-based dishes such as rice or buckwheat pilaf (*pilaf*); salty white cheese or *panir*; yogurt (*matsun*); salads of different types ranging from Russian to Middle-Eastern; fresh herbs; and sliced vegetables such as tomatoes and cucumbers. Meat in the form of barbecue (khovovats)—beef or mutton—takes a starring role on special occasions and at outdoor picnics. Another important traditional dish is *dolma*—meat- and rice-stuffed grape leaves, cabbage leaves, or summer vegetables. Popular street foods include *kebabs*, *shaurma* (a wrap sandwich filled with thinly sliced meat), and *kebachapuri*, savory cheese-filled pastries referred to by their Georgian name. Armenian (Turkish) coffee (*surj*) is served in between meals with sweets or fruits and after meals as well. Vodka or wine (or cognac on special occasions) is often drunk in shots according to the direction of the *tamada* (toastmaster) at important meals.

Armenia has been the birthplace of many well-known figures. Anastas Mikoian, a colleague of Stalin, went on to become president of the USSR in the 1960s, and his brother co-designed the MiG fighter aircraft. Ivan Bagramian, a marshal in the Red Army, led the drive to capture Berlin in 1945. Gourgen Melikian and Alicia Ghiragossian, well-known authors, were nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Arshile Gorky, a painter, became world-famous for his abstract expressionist canvases.

Some notable Americans of Armenian heritage are singer and Oscar award-winning actress Cher; one of the world's highest-ranked professional tennis players, Andre Agassi; and Pulitzer prize-winning playwright and author William Saroyan.

*June 2012*