

## **Armenia Positive About Military Reform**

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Hopes that new defence minister will deliver on much-delayed plans.

Armenia is about to launch a programme that will strengthen civilian control over its armed forces, a move which experts say is a positive sign of new defence minister Seiran Ohanian's commitment to military reform.

The Armenia defence ministry is following the example of Georgia in carrying out a strategic defence review that will look at all aspects of the armed forces. This is a key component of the country's Individual Partnership Plan, IPAP, with NATO.

International experts attended a seminar on the defence review held in Yerevan at the end of July.

Although the Armenian government has no ambitions to join NATO and the country remains part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a defence grouping within the Commonwealth of Independent States, it says it wants the military to be more convergent with NATO standards in terms of transparency and ability to cooperate with other armed forces.

A law on "special civilian service" was adopted on January 1 this year under which decisions should be taken in the next month about which posts in the defence ministry can be held by civilians rather than serving military personnel.

There has been talk of military reform in Armenia since the spring of 2005, when the then deputy defence minister Artur Agabekian - now head of the parliamentary commission on military affairs and security - said it was a priority for the ministry.

Agabekian said that by 2015 Armenia should create an army "meeting the demands of the 21st century, able to withstand new challenges and comprehensively guaranteeing the military security of the state".

However, little progress was made subsequently, especially after the then defence minister Serzh Sarkisian became prime minister in spring 2007. Sarkisian is now Armenian president.

"It is hard to say what exactly caused this [lack of progress]," said David Alaverdian, deputy director of the Armenian Centre for Transatlantic Initiatives. "It was either that Mikael Harutiunian, who replaced Serzh Sarkisian as defence minister, was unprepared to embark on real change, or that the political decision to begin reforms had not been taken at the highest level.

"In any case, for many months NATO representatives were extremely sceptical about the capacity of the Armenian military leadership to push forward defence reforms successfully."

However, the new minister Ohanian has made a different impression.

In a speech to the defence ministry on May 30 this year, he said, “extremely responsible and difficult work lies ahead of us”. He announced that a new commission, led by the chief of the general staff, would begin work on military reform, a new directorate for strategic planning would be set up, and a new law on defence would be adopted this autumn.

From this autumn, many of the military personnel now at the defence ministry will be employed as civilians.

“This calls for an extremely careful and thorough approach so that the rights of military personnel are not ignored,” Ohanian said, stressing that it would be a major psychological change for the Armenian army.

Psychologist David Atarbekian described the kind of culture change the Armenian defence establishment will have to go through if the reforms are to be successful. He said it was important for the defence ministry to recognise the need to change current ways of thinking, and to accept that there would be some resistance to this.

He noted that the military still enjoyed a unique position in Armenian society. “In present-day Armenia, the army is the only state institution which basically has the unconditional support of society, irrespective of their political sympathies,” he said.

Atarbekian said that during the state of emergency imposed in Armenia from March 1 to 20 because of the violence that followed the disputed presidential election, there were no recorded cases of clashes between soldiers and civilians.

He noted that until now, belonging to the army has meant membership of a privileged caste, and losing this by giving up a military uniform would be a profound shock for many officers.

Ohanian is a key figure in these changes. A career officer in the Soviet military, he became an Armenian hero in the Nagorny Karabakh war and was wounded in the fighting, losing a leg.

His appointment and actions have been widely welcomed.

“In my view, the Armenian army will not weaken, but on the contrary become stronger because people’s level of trust in their armed forces will increase,” said Tevan Poghosian, executive director of the Armenian Atlantic Association. “More regulated and precise planning of defence spending, as foreseen by our IPAP, will ensure that our army can be optimised.”

No one opposes military reforms as such in Armenia, but some politicians are worried that the process will bring the armed forces too close to NATO and too far away from Moscow.

Russia and Armenia signed a military cooperation treaty in 1995, and the Russians maintain a military base at Gyumri, Armenia’s second city.

Former defence minister Vagarshak Harutiunian, now an opposition politician, said a close relationship with

Russia and membership of the CSTO was important not just militarily but economically as well, because it allows the country to buy weaponry at discounted prices. This is an important factor for Armenia, when its entire national budget is less than neighbouring Azerbaijan's defence budget of more than 1.2 billion US dollars a year.

Harutiunian noted that most Armenian officers still train at Russian military academies.

"Russia's military presence in Armenia is fully justified in terms of guaranteeing the security of our republic," said Harutiunian.

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**Location:** Stavropol  
Russia  
North Ossetia  
Karabakh

**Focus:** Caucasus

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